

Mideast Conference and the Illusive Peace

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Until recently, Palestinian Authority (PA) officials including Abbas had been expressing reservations about the US sponsored November peace conference. Despite the repeated warnings that Abbas may not attend the conference unless certain conditions are met, he and the so called Arab moderates will not turn the invitation down. They are desperate for any action on the Palestinian issue and they have no control over events on the ground. Abbas government which is wholly dependent on the Americans, politically and financially, is not in a position to rebuff its main supporter, the US. And besides, the conference will be the only game in town.

Abbas government officials now sound optimistic about the conference because according to one official "when [US Secretary of State] Condoleezza Rice was in the area lately, she told [Abbas] that the US administration was determined to turn the conference into a successful event. She also promised to exert pressure on Israel to soften its position". Palestinian officials say that the conference "will launch permanent status treaty negotiations". Abbas appeared confident that the conference would meet his expectations when he talked to reporter in Amman after meeting with King Abdullah II. He said "We are negotiating with Israel a joint agreement that will be presented to the international conference to be approved and adopted. Negotiations on final agreement will begin immediately after the conference", he said. But if the Israelis are ready to attend the meetings and negotiate, they are not ready to give up the spoils of war.

During their encounter in New York last September, Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni asked Abbas to be realistic in his quest for peace. She meant that the Palestinians should lower their expectations in any negotiations on the main issues of the conflict. If the Palestinians expect the return of the West Bank and Gaza, Livni suggests that they have to settle for far less and wait longer. Senior Israeli officials stated that the final negotiations that follow the conference will not have a binding timetable.

And according to the Guardian Newspaper, a group of senior former US diplomats warned the Bush administration that "the chances of perceived failure of the conference are profound" because the US has neglected to lay the groundwork for a successful meeting. They believe that their government made a big mistake by allowing the agenda of the meeting to be set by Ehud Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas. The outcome of such a meeting will be dictated by the powerful party that has all the cards.

The Palestinian leaders had past experience negotiating with the Israelis at least twice. Their leaders negotiated and signed the infamous 1993 Oslo Accords that they sold to the Palestinians as "the peace of the brave". Then in 2000, they negotiated the issues at Camp David and rejected the final offer. Are the Palestinians in a better position to negotiate today than they were in 2000? The answer is definitely no.

Seven years after the signing of the Oslo Declaration of Principles (DOP) and many other agreements in different locations, President Clinton called for Camp David meeting of 2000 with the purpose of ending the Palestinian-Israeli conflict once and for all. After extensive negotiations, Arafat was offered an agreement to sign that would have consolidated apartheid and legitimated annexation of considerable areas of the occupied territory including Jerusalem to Israel. The agreement would have ended all future claims for Palestinian refugees' lands and property inside Israel proper and nullified fourth Geneva Convention and other UN resolutions relevant to the Palestinian refugees.

Arafat knew for sure that his acceptance signature on the offer would be his death sentence. But he also knew that Oslo agreements that he enthusiastically signed and promoted as the road to peace limited his power to extract any concessions from Israel that may satisfy the Palestinians. He and the whole Palestinian cause were captive of his own Oslo agreements. He rejected the offer and could not come up with a counter offer because the gap between the US-Israeli offer and the minimum acceptable final solution by the Palestinians was too wide to bridge.

Arafat rejected the final offer, but he never told the Palestinian people and the international community what he rejected and why, thus giving the Israeli and the US media a free hand to tell the story even if it was completely wrong. The media claimed that Arafat turned down 95 percent of the West Bank and Gaza and part of Jerusalem city. They repeated the false claim so many times over the years until it has become an accepted fact.

The 5 percent of the occupied land to be annexed to Israel that the news media referred to did not include the settlements surrounding areas taken or earmarked for expansion, roadways joining settlements with each other and to Jerusalem, and wide arterial swaths providing water, sewage services, electricity and communications. This infrastructure that supports the settlements divides the entire West Bank into multiple fragments. The area of the unilaterally expanded municipality of Jerusalem alone exceeds 5.4 percent of the West Bank and the offer would leave more than 300,000 settlers in 200 settlements under the sovereignty of Israel.

The real offer was only "64 percent of the West Bank and Gaza and few villages outside Jerusalem that the Palestinians could call their capital". Prime Minister Barak would not give up the settlements and East Jerusalem. Camp David 2000 offer dictated that Palestinians accept to live with 80 per cent of the settlements and no right of return for refugees. The Israelis and their supporters claim their official offer to Arafat had been the most generous one by Israel. But David Hirst argues in his book, "The Gun and the Olive Branch: The Roots of Violence in the Middle East", that nothing can be compared to the generosity of the Palestinian negotiators to Israel in the Oslo agreements.

Many things have changed to the worst for the Palestinians since Camp David. The occupied lands are partitioned into West Bank and Gaza Strip entities under two different political programs and the US managed to widen the rift between them. Israel and the US have divided the Palestinians into moderates and extremists and encouraged the internal strife between them. More than 11,000 Palestinian prisoners languish in Israeli jails, gigantic concrete separation wall has been built on Palestinian lands, and there are more settlements and settlers in the occupied land. And most important, Abbas has allied his regime with Israel against his Palestinian political opponents. His strength is based on his personal relations with the Israelis and the US, but his home front is not united behind him.

Abbas turns to consultation from Israeli and American officials not on how to end the Israeli occupation, but on how to defeat the Palestinian resistance. On August 19, 2007, Ha'aretz newspaper revealed a secret only the Israelis know. Ranny Lovenstein, an Israeli government official doubles as a consultant for Prime Minister Fayyad. Among his latest contributions to Abbas and

Fayyad government was a plan on how to defeat Hamas in the next Palestinian elections, according to Ha'aretz.

While Abbas and Olmert meet regularly supposedly to map out their vision for the future Palestinian state, there are countless examples of systematic Israeli actions in the occupied land that suggest it is not ready to negotiate in good faith. Only one month before the conference, Israel continues to build the separation wall on Palestinian land and never dismantled the hundreds of roadblocks. It has released some prisoners mostly from Fatah Faction, none from Hamas or Jerusalem, to improve Abbas image among his people, but number of Palestinians arrested in the meantime exceeded the number of the released. Israel arrested 650 Palestinians in September alone according to the Palestinian Prisoner Club. BBC reported that the Israeli occupation army has been demolishing houses in many West Bank towns and villages for different reasons. For example, the military handed out dozens of demolition orders in Akkaba, a small village near Jenin, including the kindergarten school that was built with European aid because they are in a militarized zone.

The Palestinian people are desperate for having peace with justice, but they are afraid the conference will lead only to protracted negotiations rather than the end of occupation. They should be suspicious if the pre-conference Palestinian-Israeli joint agreement does not refer to Israel as an occupier and the West Bank and Gaza as occupied land. Otherwise the occupied land will be treated as a disputed territory as the Israelis and their supporters continue to call it in order to claim the areas that they intend to annex. The Palestinians will be served better if they assemble a new negotiating team that does not include any of those who negotiated and defended the Oslo accords. The Palestinians should not expand the concept of having "leaders for life" to include having "negotiators for life" despite their incompetence.

If Arafat who was supported by all Palestinians in the occupied lands failed to produce an acceptable peace with justice agreement because he was restrained by Oslo agreements, Abbas failure today is certain because he is not only restrained by Oslo agreements. He is also restrained by his alliance with Israel against a large segment of his own constituency. The Palestinians should ask if Abbas has plan B in case of failure. If he does not have such a plan, I propose one. Abbas should admit that he failed, apologize to the Palestinians for putting all his eggs in the US-Israeli basket and ask the Palestinians to replace him and his team.

P.S.

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