

Israel-Palestine Relations: A New Year, New Predictions

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Over the past years I have attempted to make some predictions about what we can expect to happen over the next year. I admit that this is quite risky as I don't have any real crystal ball to tell me the future. This could be somewhat compared to reading coffee cups or looking at the stars. I usually come out better than what sheer luck could provide. I indulge your patience and request that at least you view this as entertainment (perhaps not very good entertainment at that).

Prediction #1 - The Olmert Government will survive the year. I don't expect new elections in Israel in the coming year. With a majority of some 78 seats in the coalition, even with the lowest public popularity rating ever held by a Prime Minister in Israel, Olmert's government faces no real threats.

Prediction #2 - Amir Peretz will continue to lead the Labour party. Even with Peretz's all time low public approval rating, he has no where to go and he will fight to stay in the Labour leadership position and in the Ministry of Defense. Peretz will not be found primarily responsible for Israel's failures in Lebanon. The faulty military concept employed in Lebanon and the poor performance of the army had their roots set deep down way before Peretz ever arrived in the Ministry of Defense. Peretz's leadership in the Labour party is being challenged by many candidates - Ami Ayalon, the front runner, Danny Yatom, Matan Vilnai, perhaps Ephraim Sneh, Avishai Braverman, Ofir Pines - the only Labour Minister to resign the government when Lieberman was asked to sit at the table and Ehud Barak. Barak's chances don't seem very strong as he still has many more enemies in the party than allies, yet Barak might still find himself sitting at the Cabinet table if Olmert could move Peretz out of the Defense Ministry. A deal could be worked out that in exchange for Barak removing himself from the race for the Labour leadership, Peretz would move into the position of a Minister for Public Welfare. In politics anything is possible. Peretz is a fighter when he is fighting for himself. He has pulled rabbits out of the Labour hat in the past and I would not put it past him that he has some more rabbits there. I would most prefer to see Ofir Pines in the leadership, but that is unlikely to happen.

Prediction #3 - There will not be new elections in Palestine over the six months. I cannot predict more than six months forward on this question. President Abbas declared that he would hold new elections, but as in the past, no date was set and no new announcements on this question have been issued since. Abbas is great at making threats and has a very poor record on making good on them. The moment that Hamas announced that it would boycott the elections, it was clear that they could not be held without launching a civil war, which Abbas seems intent on not doing. A couple of things could cause a change in this regard: if, for example, Marwan Barghout was amongst those that will be released in the

upcoming prisoner exchange, the possible ground swell of pressure from within the Fatah ranks could force new elections, regardless of the potential Hamas boycott. If Fatah activists finally force the democratic processes of reform within Fatah on Abbas, the pressure for new elections will also increase. A senior advisor to PA Prime Minister Haniyeh told me yesterday that Hamas is still intent on reviving the discussions on a Palestinian National Unity Government and he was quite convinced that it would happen. I am somewhat less convinced, but it still remains a real possibility.

Prediction #4 - The Bush administration will pressure Olmert to assist in strengthening Mahmoud Abbas. The US position will be to continue to "gesturize" the process rather than bringing the sides to real political negotiations, which is the only thing that could really strengthen Abbas. It seems that there is only one real way to strengthen Abbas, or for that matter any Palestinian leader, and that is to move directly into permanent status negotiations to end the occupation, establish a viable sovereign Palestinian state and to reach real Israeli-Palestinian peace. Everything short of this is simply prolonging the occupation and no Palestinian leader will be able to lead his way out of the chaos without a real and genuine political peace process. It does not seem that Prime Minister Olmert is ready or willing to enter into such a process at the outset of 2006. Perhaps this will change in the coming months.

Prediction #5 - Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni's new political initiative will lead no where. Livni's plan calls for moving directly to Phase II of the Road Map which would establish a Palestinian state with provisional borders and only then to return to Phase I of the Road Map which includes all of the security related obligations of the Palestinians, the removal of unauthorized outposts by the Israelis and a return to the lines of September 28, 2000. Livni's plan furthermore calls for Israel to withdraw and to remove settlements east of the separation barrier. Livni got it right in understanding that Phase I of the Road Map is implementable and that somehow must be found to bypass it for the time being. The Palestinians have completely rejected the idea of a state with provisional borders; they incorrectly call it a provisional state, but perhaps that term is exactly what it would be. The only way to relate to the dead Road Map is by going to Phase III which is the negotiations on the end of the conflict, the end of the occupation and the creation of the Palestinian state. Only then would be it possible to return to Phase I which would be linked with the implementation of the permanent status agreement. At that time, it would be essential to include mechanisms for monitoring the implementation of the agreements, verifying that both sides are meeting the terms of the agreement and the Road Map and devising a real mechanism for resolving disputes as they arise. Livni was courageous by launching a new initiative against the will of the Prime Minister. It shows that she is thinking forward and is strong enough to go against the party leader. I would put my money on her in terms of her career advancement in the years to come.

What could be!

The New Year begins with a sense that there are new opportunities for moving forward. June 5, 2007 will mark 40 years of occupation. It is time for this occupation to end. The changes in Washington with a new Secretary of Defense, the Baker-Hamilton report, the burning desire of most Americans to get out of Iraq, the change of leadership in Congress - all bid well for a change in the US role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The new Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-Moon, also stated in his first major speech that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must come to an end. It is quite clear to most of the world and to most

Israelis and most Palestinians how the conflict should end. Olmert and Abbas also both know very well the parameters of a possible Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. What we require is real leadership – something that has been absent for quite some time.

Egypt and Jordan can continue to play a very constructive role and my proposal for the establishment of the “mini-quartet” of Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Egypt that would replace the international quartet in future peacemaking is still a real and viable option. The international quartet would have a role to play if and when Israel and Palestine reach agreements. The Israeli request for an expanded international force in Lebanon and the deployment of Egyptian troops in Rafah and EU Monitors at the Egyptian-Gaza border are all very significant. It is crucial that this kind of international involvement be successful, because we are going to need international troops to be deployed in Palestine. I fully believe that it will be Israel that will request the deployment of such troops.

Immediate steps must be taken to improve the economic situation in Palestine. The main conditions for any economic growth there are freer movement and access. The agreements on movement and access must be implemented immediately. Israel must return the tax revenues that it is holding to the Palestinians, and not only \$100m as promised by Olmert to Abbas. All \$600m+ is Palestinian money and must be returned to the Palestinians. If Israel does not wish to transfer the money to the Palestinian treasury which is controlled by Hamas, it could transfer the money to Abbas directly. If this is unacceptable by Israel, it could bank the money in an escrow account and allow Abbas to borrow against it. Israel must also allow for the reconnection of the economies of Gaza and the West Bank. The continued strangulation of the Palestinian economy by Israel must finally come to an end.

Abbas must initiate and allow for democratic reform within Fatah. The new generation of practical Palestinian leaders must step forward to capture their place in Palestinian politics. The old generation must step down and allow the democratic process to take place. There can be no chance of replacing Hamas without real democratic reforms in Fatah.

Israel must answer the Syrian peace overtures without delay. The fear is that it is a ploy to regain the Golan Heights without really granting peace. The best deal for Israel would be to link the Syrian initiative with the Israeli-Palestinian track and in that way accept and implement the Arab League Peace Initiative. A successful outcome would assure Israel peace and normal relations with all of the member states of the Arab League. If the Arab League wishes to advance its peace plan it would be very wise to invest a large sum of money in marketing and explaining the initiative to the Israeli people. The plan is the best one that has come along and the people of Israel would be very well advised to accept it.

Wishing all of the readers of the column a very happy and peaceful 2007.

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