

Palestine: Man of Peace Swimming against the Current

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For the first time, since the U.S.-hosted Annapolis conference on November 27 last year re-launched the Palestinian - Israeli negotiations, which were interrupted by the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000 after the collapse of the Camp David trilateral summit, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas came out for the first time on record in Cairo on September 6 to “doubt” striking a peace deal with Israel “by the end of the year because very little time is left;” on September 10 he reiterated his skepticism in an interview with the Israeli daily Haaretz.

Accordingly he dispelled U.S. President George W. Bush’s pledge to reach such a deal before his term ends and at the same time practically announced that peace talks have now been frozen for at least a year by the government changes in Washington and Tel Aviv. Abbas was reportedly scheduled to hold his last meeting with the Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, in Jerusalem on September 16, one day before Kadima, Olmert’s ruling party elects his successor, ahead of his scheduled meeting with U.S. President George W. Bush at the White House on September 25. It seems all the partners to the Annapolis process are trying to strike a last minute impossible deal or simply saying good by to each other.

Nonetheless Abbas shows all evidence that he is determined to swim against an overwhelming current to prove that he is the persistent unrelenting Palestinian partner who will never despair in his pursuit of peace, even he would pay the price with his own life, despite all the internal and external odds, nor will he be deterred by the undelivered U.S. promises to loose trust in Washington.

On September 10 he told Haaretz that, “Even today, I’m convinced that I would have signed the Oslo Accords. I risked my life for peace and if I have to pay for it with my life, that’s a negligible price. I don’t regret the Oslo Accords. Twenty years before the agreement I believed in peace with the Israelis, and I still believe in it.”

He is still desperately determined to remain committed to his “strategic option” of a negotiated peace deal with Israel in pursuit of a life-long hope that would make or break his political career as well as a Palestinian leadership team, led by him, that has bet everything on a mirage-like U.S. promises to deliver a Palestinian state on the part of historic Palestine

which Israel occupied in 1967, although Bush's pledges to former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on April 14, 2004 have so far proved much more stronger strategic commitments than the U.S. vague promises to Palestinians, and despite the fact that the overall Israeli policy and every single tactic of that policy indicate a strategy that clashes head-to-head with the minimum Palestinian national aspiration for an independent, viable and contiguous state as the basis for a just and lasting peace.

Not deterred by all indications to the contrary, his determination, it seems, would never lose hope to agree with those, like King Abdullah II of Jordan, who believe that the Annapolis opportunity was the last chance for the Palestinian - Israeli peace process to deliver. He is determined too not to be held responsible for any collapse of the peace talks; therefore he ignores Israeli non-commitment and clings to his own commitments to the letter and soul of the Annapolis understandings.

He is similarly determined not to lose his hope that the United States could still deliver on its promises. "We are determined to continue accelerated diplomatic negotiations concurrently with the change of administration in the United States," Abbas was quoted as saying in Cernobbio, Italy, on Friday. He appealed to the upcoming U.S. administration not to waste "seven more years" to resume its peace efforts. "The new administration should not wait seven years for us to start negotiations. It should begin immediately as soon as a new president is in the White House." However, with nothing on the record to prove the U.S. would be forthcoming, a Palestinian semi-consensus is ruling out such a possibility as wishful thinking, and Abbas is similarly swimming against this strong internal current, which has all throughout opposed the Annapolis initiative as a non-starter.

Peace-making seems so absurd now as to defy all logic and belief, at least to the majority of the Palestinian people, according to Palestinian polls, the most recent of which was released on September 7 by the Near East Consulting Company to show that 86% of Palestinians are frustrated, 43% believed that the conflict with Israel will continue and a Palestinian state will not be established, 24% of respondents believed that a Palestinian state will be established within 10-20 years, 18% within 5-10 years 16% within a year to five years.

The optimistic fanfare Abbas and his team raised following the Annapolis conference has now boiled down to publicly voiced bitter disappointment and disillusion; his earlier insistence on time tables and deadlines as preconditions have now been forgone for the sake of not dooming the talking process; his threatening repeated warnings that the continued expansion of the illegal Israeli colonial settlements would spell the end of negotiations have been replaced by lenient appeals to the same effect.

Abbas' preconditioning a deal with the Israelis on reaching an agreement on all and every issue of the final status issues, a precondition which was recently revived with stress, was

met by a cold shower with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's proposal for a partial deal agreement that rules out Jerusalem, ostensibly temporarily until a later stage, but detrimentally excluding the issue of refugees for good, a deal not to be implemented but to be presented to Bush then to the United Nations General Assembly in November, which would bestow on the proposal a UN legitimacy that would in turn legitimize Ariel Sharon's original draft of an interim, transitional and long-term temporary Palestinian state on (42) percent of the West Bank, demarcated by the more than 700km-long wall Israel is building on the occupied Palestinian territory, termed by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the Wall of Expansion and Annexation, by Israelis as the "security barrier" and by everyday media as simply the Apartheid Wall, which the International Court of Justice in the Hague ruled as "illegal" in July 2004.

Abbas, the PLO and the Palestinian Authority (PA) have officially on record rejected both Israeli proposals of the transitional state and the partial agreement. " Jerusalem and the right of return are inalienable Palestinian rights, too," he confirmed during his recent visit to Cairo . However this official rejection is defying the Israeli-created facts on the ground of more than 200 Jewish settlements and outposts, home to slightly less than half a million settlers, living among two and a half million Palestinians, but exclusively controlling (37) percent and restricting the free movement of Palestinians on (21) percent of the land, all tied inextricably into Israel proper by a massive network of Israeli-only highways and, ultimately, the "Security Barrier," which all indicate that the Occupation is no longer "a temporary military situation" as defined by international law. These facts, together with the U.S. collusion with the Israeli determination to annex most of them, especially in Jerusalem , to Israel proper, sweep away whatever credibility is left to whatever remains of the peace process.

Bush's letter to Sharon was an old proof of the U.S. collusion; the latest proof was revealed on September 7 by Tayseer Khaled, a member of the Executive Committee of the Palestinian Liberation Organization's (PLO), that the U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, in her last visit to Ramallah, tried to get the PLO's OK for a statehood with temporary borders and the postponement of negotiating the outstanding final-status issues.

While rejecting out of hand the notion that peace-making would ever have a "last chance," Abbas however would accept a "last chance" to resolve peacefully the inter-Palestinian conflict with Hamas in the Gaza Strip. If the ongoing Egyptian mediation fails to reconcile the Palestinian rivals, Abbas will "take all steps and measures to restore Gaza before the end of this year," he said in Egypt . This impatience with Hamas is another manifestation of his determination to use the break in negotiations, brought about by the U.S. and Israeli government changes, to put his Palestinian house in order ahead of any possible resumption of talks thereafter.

Within this context Abbas is battling political foes on two fronts, declaring the Hamas - Gaza front as being his first priority. He is also involved in a power struggle within his own Fatah

party on another front. Abbas here is allying himself with a U.S. – backed and Israeli – okayed diverse spectrum of Fatah and non-Fatah politicians who share his strategy and tactics, with the government of Prime Minister Salam Fayyad in the forefront. The battle ground revolves now on the renewal of Abbas’ mandate, which terminates on January 9.

This spectrum is evolving as a “third power” between Fatah and Hamas and is fueling the rivalry between them in the hope of establishing itself as the alternative to both, but has yet to officially take shape as a unified party. Both Abbas and this “third” power are mutually exploiting each other to gain the upper hand both within the ranks of the Palestinian Authority and the PLO, where there is still very strong opposition to the strategy of both. This evolving force is fomenting the power struggle between Abbas and that opposition as much as it is exacerbating his rivalry with Hamas, cornering him in a very sensitive but critical showdown with his own party, Fatah. Abbas’ bitter battle with Hamas is smoke-screening the power struggle within Fatah, which currently evolve around convening both the PLO National Council (parliament-in-exile) and the sixth Congress of Fatah, both overdue.

However Abbas shows all the determination necessary to put his house in order, with his sight unwaveringly focused on his peace prize, an independent, viable and contiguous state, no matter what!

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