

Palestine: Peace and Democracy must go Hand in Hand

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After years of marked absence, the Bush administration has finally decided to upgrade its involvement in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The announcement of a Middle East peace conference in Annapolis, Maryland has raised red flags for anyone who has learned from past experience how unbalanced and insincere peace efforts actually can lead to further violence. And it requires little cynicism to ponder how genuine these current efforts are.

It has been suggested that President Bush — whose actions have thus defined his legacy as that of a war president — wishes to leave on a more positive note. We heard the same argument in mid 2000 when President Bill Clinton facilitated ill-prepared talks, the failure of which sparked tension and violence, which were of course blamed solely on Palestinians.

Others argue that the conference is motivated not by a desire for lasting peace, but by the wish to further isolate Hamas – the party that was democratically elected by a decisive majority in the Occupied Territories' legislative elections in January 2006.

Regardless of the fact that the transparency of the elections was praised by international monitors such as Jimmy Carter, the democratically elected winner was completely shunned by the US and Israel. Instead they cautioned Fatah, President Abbas political party, against joining a proposed coalition government with a party they deemed as terrorist. All attempts at forging national unity among the conflicting factions were destined to failure, since such attempts were met by joint US-Israeli resolve to topple Hamas.

As the division between Fatah and Hamas grew, the Bush administration began hinting at the possibility of hosting a peace conference. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who had previously insisted on the 'unilateral' paradigm – predicated on the assumption that Israel has no peace partner amongst Palestinians – now agreed to take part in the event. President Abbas, widely perceived with contempt by many Palestinians and Arabs, understood that his participation could help provide him with greater political validity. Hamas, of course, was notably not invited.

In the build-up to the conference, Olmert and Abbas have been holding regular meetings. Statements and declarations made by both leaders and their advisors indicate that Israel is striving to lower expectations, while Abbas hopes to turn the conference into a platform for serious negotiations. Their last meeting took place in Jerusalem on Friday, October 26, the purpose of which was reportedly to resolve issues over a joint statement. Nabil Abu Rdeneh, Abbas' spokesman told reporters, "Today we expect the Israelis to stop putting obstacles preventing us from reaching a joint statement for the fall summit."

Olmert, with little popularity amongst the Israelis and a weakening mandate in the country's parliament, is repeatedly attempting to water down expectations. He even claims to be unsure as to whether the conference will take place at all, reportedly telling journalists on Thursday, October 25, "If all goes well, hopefully, we will meet in Annapolis. [But] Annapolis is not made to be the event for the declaration of peace."

This overt lowering of expectations suggests that the Bush administration knows well that the conference will not deliver peace; neither Abbas nor Olmert seem equipped for such a task. Moreover, the administration has displayed virtually no signs of being an honest broker; its unreserved and unconditional backing of Israel is stronger than ever. The conference will likely be a media spectacle in which participants will reaffirm their commitment to peace, Israel's security, condemnation of Palestinian terrorism and so forth.

What is truly dangerous is the fact that a peace conference which delivers nothing but empty promises is likely to actually precipitate violence. Palestinians, humiliated and besieged, might exhibit their anger in a myriad of ways, for which they will only receive further condemnation.

Following Israel's recent declaration of Gaza as a hostile entity, and the more recent decision to gradually cut electricity supplies to parts of the Gaza Strip, the situation in the impoverished strip is growing more desperate everyday. A peace conference with no political horizon - one that was repeatedly promised by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice - will add more fuel to the already volatile political landscape in Palestine and Israel. Considering the violence that followed the failed Camp David talks of July 2000, similar scenarios are most palpable. In order for a peace conference to bring a true, lasting and just peace between Palestinians and Israelis, democracy and the collective choices of the Palestinian people must be respected.

The Palestinian delegation needs to represent all Palestinians and must carry a clear mandate to negotiate. Israel meanwhile needs to be willing to engage in serious negotiations, not to win time for its unilateral projects in the West Bank, but to discuss final status issues without delay, notwithstanding the status of Jerusalem and refugees. International law must be respected by both parties, and by the US hosts as a mutual frame of reference, according to which a conflict resolution can be tailored.

Without these conditions, the Maryland conference, and any other, will most likely fail, a failure that could tragically drag the entire region deeper into the dark abyss of military occupation, state violence and, indeed, terrorism.

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