

Palestine: U.S. Diplomacy Misses Opportunity , Shuns Peace Prospects

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Instead of building a diplomatic momentum on the political breakthrough mediated by their Saudi Arabian ally who succeeded in developing an Arab and Palestinian consensus on going along with the U.S.-steered Quartet efforts to revive the deadlocked peace process, the American diplomacy has turned their sponsored Palestinian - Israeli summit meeting in Jerusalem on Monday from a promising event into a missed opportunity, thus shaking off a burgeoning potential for a more coordinated regional U.S. - Arab front.

The trilateral meeting, which secretary of State Condoleezza Rice planned with President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to be a breakthrough in a six-year old Palestinian - Israeli impasse, began without an agreed upon agenda or at least with a last minute change of the originally perceived agenda, convened grudgingly as a face saving event and ended nonetheless a summit void of content after two hours of "informal" talks in a pointless "dialogue" of the deaf at the heavily-guarded David Citadel Hotel adjacent to Jerusalem's Old City, where the Israeli "archaeological" excavations at Islam's third holiest site of al-Aqsa Mosque compound are slowly but systemically bulldozing whatever national and spiritual symbols left for Palestinians to negotiate about.

Embarrassing U.S. friends and allies as important as Riyadh, Amman and Cairo, and further antagonizing influential regional players like Syria, who all weighed in heavily to conclude the Mecca deal in order to develop a unified Arab and Palestinian stance that easily could be discerned as distancing them away from Iranian influences, which is a key U.S.-Israeli endeavor, may not harm the U.S. historically-tested strategic alliances with Arabs, but it would certainly put off indefinitely whatever is left for peace-making in the region.

There was nothing new in the five points of agreement reported by Rice after the meeting. Commitment to the two-state vision of President George W. Bush, continued respect of the ceasefire, working together to implement the Quartet-drafted "Road Map," honouring by the Palestinian government of the Quartet-adopted three conditions of renouncing violence, recognizing Israel and honouring previously signed accords with her, and agreeing to meet again, have all become obsolete non-starters in view of the U.S. and Israeli determination not to follow them up with working mechanisms and binding timetables in "formal negotiations" that end the crisis management of the futile "informal dialogues" of the past six years.

The disappointing outcome of the trilateral summit could be summed up in pointless open-ended promises: "The president and prime minister agreed they would meet together again soon" in a fourth encounter, Rice said while lonely briefing reporters without her summiters and without taking any questions after the meeting, which concluded without an official

statement, adding she in her turn “will be coming back” on her tenth trip to the Middle East since taking office, and reiterating an obsolete cliché: “All three of us affirmed our commitment to a two-state solution” and, probably drawing ironically on the lessons of history learned from the tragic, but successful, experience of the birth of the Israeli state, “agreed that a Palestinian state cannot be born of violence and terror” so as to avert similar tragedies !

Playing into the hands of the Israeli declared policy of “lowering the expectations” of Palestinians, Rice promoted the summit since her landing in Israel on Friday with a flow of skeptical and discouraging remarks. The “uncertainty” of the new Palestinian government, which her administration has ‘strong reservations” against, will “complicate” U.S. peace efforts, she said, thus creating the environment for conflicting Palestinian and Israeli expectations and contradictory differences over the agenda, which the Palestinians expected to include the final status issues and a “mechanism to move from words to deeds,” according to chief negotiator Saeb Erekat, but the Israelis ruled out any “deliberations” on those issues, especially Jerusalem, refugees and return to pre-1967 borders, according to Olmert.

Israel had every intention to derail any progress at the summit unless the Palestinian leaders subscribe to her plan for a long-term interim arrangement during which they should be satisfied with a transitional state without borders on 42 percent of the Israeli-occupied West Bank and the Israeli-besieged Gaza Strip, a plan that is rejected by a total Palestinian consensus conveyed on Monday to Rice because in the long run this plan will boil down to nothing more than giving Israel enough time to create more facts on the ground to render any Palestinian state, whether temporary or permanent, unviable, unsustainable and impossible.

Israel and her American strategic ally promoted Abbas as a partner first as an alternative for late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, but when he ascended to the helm of the national decision-making they qualified his partnership credentials by taking on Hamas; when Abbas concluded that was a recipe for civil war and insisted on dialogue with the Islamic movement he was accused of “dialogue with terror;” when he succeeded in convincing Hamas to join the political institutions of the Oslo accords in a democratic process they challenged his credentials because, according to them, the ensuing two-head Palestinian Authority compromised his representative competence and his ability to govern; after the Mecca deal they claimed his credentials as a peace partner were neutralized by his new partnership with Hamas and steered the Quartet to insist on their three preconditions as the prerequisite to legitimize him as a partner, and sent Rice to convey the message.

Evasive Diplomacy to Avoid Negotiations

However, President Bush, torpedoed the success of her mission when he hours ahead of her arrival in the region ruled out, according to Olmert, any dealing by his administration with any new Palestinian government formed on the basis of the inter-Palestinian power-sharing deal, which the Saudis mediated and sponsored at the highest level in Mecca two weeks ago, while the Congress pre-empted her success by blocking a \$86 million aid package promised for Abbas before the deal, thus dispatching Rice empty handed politically and financially and armed only with noncommittal and non-starter open-ended promises her administration failed to honor during more than six years in office. Rice is practically left without any initiative despite her face saving unconvincing promises.

Amid mounting Israeli and American threats of tightening the siege imposed on the Palestinian people, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and its offshoot, the Palestinian Authority, Palestinian and Arab officials and observers are almost in consensus on interpreting the U.S. policy as premeditated and not a blunder, aimed at “aborting” the Abbas - Olmert summit, the new Palestinian unity government and coerce the newly unified Palestinian leadership into yielding to the Israeli-dictated preconditions by refusing the Mecca accord as the approach to lifting the siege, according to the leader of the Fatah parliamentary bloc, Azzam al-Ahmad.

By ruling out the Mecca accord as a non-starter the U.S. policy was also interpreted as an evasive diplomacy to avoid negotiations, whether bilateral or multilateral within the framework of an international conference proposed by the Palestinians, the League of Arab States and recently by Russian President Vladimir Putin during a Middle East tour, and supported by the pro-Mecca deal Turkish-chaired Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), because Israel is more a beneficiary of the besieged Palestinian status quo and the current Arab status quo overburdened with several crises than from negotiations and because the U.S. Administration sees it has more area for maneuvering in such an unstable environment than in a politically stable one.

The Israeli and U.S. framework condemns PLO’s partnership with Hamas, labelled by both as a “terrorist” group and persist on sowing discord among Palestinian parties so as not to give “legitimacy” to the Islamic movement. What’s wrong with giving legitimacy to Hamas? Wasn’t the legitimacy given to the PLO, which was also labelled by both strategic allies as “terrorist,” the organization’s guarantee to involve in political struggle in pursuit of its national goals? “They want Abbas to take actions that lead to a civil war — to protect past agreements that the Israelis have destroyed,” veteran peace advocate and member of the PLO Executive Committee, Yasser Abed Rabbo, told Reuters.

The U.S.-Israeli diplomacy is also steering against world consensus. Russia , a member of the Quartet is already saying the new Palestinian government should be dealt with, recognized, and legitimized. Although the Europeans and the United Nations, the other two members, are taking a cautious position, France, Germany and the Nordics of Denmark, Norway and Sweden also welcomed the Palestinian unity government deal. Aside from Israel the United States is lonely not forthcoming.

“Washington’s handling of Hamas is the latest in an impressive list of US policy mistakes in the Middle East . Rather than strengthening democratization processes across the region, the administration has weakened them. Rather than lessening hostility to America , the hostility is reaching unprecedented levels. Rather than furthering a peace process between Palestinians and Israelis, the US has rendered negotiations, let alone an agreement, almost impossible,” Omar Karmi wrote in Lebanon ’s The Daily Star on February 12.

When Riyadh stepped in out of national interest to skilfully contain some of the regional mess created by the U.S. blundering, not only in Iraq and Lebanon but also and more successfully in Palestine, where a unity government is underway thanks to the Mecca agreement, Washington still seems ungratefully determined to miss this opportunity to improve its image and help one of its most important regional allies avert the regional repercussions of her foreign policy failures in the Middle East, at a time when the United States needs Saudi Arabia for other regional efforts.

Palestinian Unity Pre-requisite for Peace

Mecca deal politically averted Palestinian infighting, which could have been only averted otherwise by directing the Palestinian fire against a common enemy, a tactic that the latest attack in Elat could have been the first salvo. Internal Palestinian calm is a prerequisite for calm across the still un-demarcated Israeli borders. Haim Malka, deputy director of the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC, wrote in the Washington Post on February 13 urging the U.S. to support the unity government “not because it brings peace, but because it moves us significantly further toward stabilizing the conflict than a Palestinian civil war would ... without a basic accommodation among Palestinians there is no chance for a renewed political process between Israelis and Palestinians.”

Similarly, Robert Malley, a senior aide to former U.S. President Bill Clinton on Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, concluded in an interview published by the Council on Foreign Relations on February 14: “Abbas could not have concluded a historic deal with Israel, entailing difficult compromises, without a prior intra-Palestinian agreement. He would have lacked the authority, legitimacy, and credibility to reach an agreement with Israel if he were simultaneously at war with a sizeable portion of the Palestinian people. The only way Israeli-Palestinian negotiations can proceed and conclude is in the context of a Fatah/Hamas national unity agreement, which brings stability to the Palestinian arena. All the rest is wishful—and dangerous—thinking.”

Only Palestinian national unity can sustain a viable peace process. Oslo accords could not have been launched on a divided Palestinian house; those accords were based on the Palestinian consensus on the two-state solution by the PLO National Council meeting in Algiers in 1988. That was exactly what the Mecca agreement achieved.

At least the U.S. and Israel should give a chance for the national unity government to prove its political credentials and not repeat their mistaken boycott of the former government, contrary to the repeated advice of their ostensibly trusted Palestinian partner Mahmoud Abbas; that government is now counterproductively, from their point of view, replaced by a stronger one supported by national unity, Arab, Islamic and almost a world consensus.

They could at least flash on a green light for the other Quartet three members to lift their siege and for the international banking system to channel in the Arab and Islamic-pledged financial aid, including the recent Saudi pledge in Mecca of \$US1 billion, to the united Palestinian Authority to ease the poverty and deprivation caused by their imposed blockade, in a show of good will for a mutual trial period of grace during which they could maintain their own sanctions until their arguments prove either right or wrong.

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