



TEL AVIV NOTES

AN UPDATE ON POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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PICKING UP THE PIECES

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An end to the clashes between Palestinians and Israelis does not appear to be in sight, giving rise to a most profound sense of pessimism about what is left of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Indeed, there is not much reason for optimism. But it would be wrong to conclude that all is lost, that the peace process is over and that we are destined to face an interminable cycle of bloodshed. Israelis and Palestinians cannot solve their problems by the use of force. Neither Israel nor the Palestinians have the capacity to impose their political positions or historical narratives on the other.

The parties are presently incapable of negotiating with each other and are consequently poised to take unilateral actions. Yasir Arafat might soon declare Palestinian independence and Ehud Barak might then respond by declaring an annexation of settlements. This exchange, however, will change little, if anything at all, on the ground. And then what?

The violence will not go on forever. It will have to come to an end, hopefully sooner rather than later. Once that happens, the parties will have to come back to the table. After all, what choices do they have?

True enough, the Oslo process has probably exhausted itself. So there will be another. The peace process has lasted as long as it has and has withstood many seemingly fatal shocks only to bounce back time and again and demonstrate that the parties have no other alternative but to continue their negotiations. Indeed, Israelis and

Palestinians entered the process in the first place because of this restricted choice, and not because either of the parties had undergone a sudden ideological metamorphosis.

Renewed negotiations would have to be less ambitious than the attempt that has just failed to achieve an all-encompassing agreement on "an end of conflict." Arafat is not ready to proclaim an end of conflict on the terms offered by Barak, and Barak is incapable of accepting the terms Arafat would set for an end of conflict, especially on questions such as the return of refugees. It would, therefore, be more appropriate at this stage to set more limited goals rather than repeating the attempts to achieve what has hitherto proved to be unattainable. A step by step approach to resolve the possible and gradually deescalate is a more realistic route to pursue.

Arafat's attempt to internationalize the conflict by criminalizing Israel, and thus to bring about an imposed solution in which he would get more in exchange for less, is not likely to work. That would perhaps be a remote possibility only in the unlikely event that US Middle East policy underwent a 180-degree about face. By resorting to violence, Arafat has shored up his previously sagging domestic support. His inter-Arab standing has also improved dramatically. But in the process he has lost the Israeli public, including many in the "peace camp." They have been completely disillusioned by the explosion of the Oslo dream. When the peace process gets

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back on track, in whatever shape or form, it is the support of important segments of the Israeli public that Arafat will find most difficult to retrieve.

In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as opposed to Israel's conflict with the Arab states, there are issues to be addressed that touch upon Israel's very existence as the state of the Jewish people, and not just to its territorial extent. The "1967 issues" relate to Israel's territorial conquests in the Six-Day War and remain the main bones of contention with the Arab states on Israel's borders (including Syria). The "1948 issues" relate to Israel's very soul and being, on two counts: the refugee question, and the Arab minority who have been citizens of Israel since its independence.

Israel cannot allow the 1948 refugees to return and still remain the state of the Jewish people. Nor can it concede to the demands of increasing numbers of Israeli Arabs that it cease being the state of the Jewish people and become the "state of all its citizens." Though seemingly innocuous, this formula is no more than a euphemism for negating Israel's *raison d'etre*. It

is these issues that now appear far more troubling than they may have been only a few weeks ago. The violence in the West Bank and Gaza spilled over into Israel proper in early October. The worst riots by Israel's Arab minority since 1948 have produced a sense of profound and unprecedented insecurity among Jewish Israelis *vis-a-vis* their fellow citizens.

At the end of the day, it is the Jewish Israelis who will have to be convinced to make the necessary concessions. Their willingness to do so now is far less than at any time since the beginning of the Oslo process in 1993. All the more reason to resort to an incremental process that will allow for the gradual reconstruction of even a measure of the confidence that has recently evaporated into thin air. In the event that it proves impossible to achieve such modest objectives, Israel may have to embark on a more extensive unilateral delineation of defensible borders, until such time as the Palestinians are ready to discuss agreed final borders between Israel and the emerging state of Palestine.