

The Peace Talks re-start and fail

At long last direct Israeli-Palestinian peace talks resumed in Sharm el-Sheikh on September 2nd. US Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton scurried about giving maximum encouragement to the parties to reach an agreement. Both sides committed themselves to reach a peace deal within a year. Benyamin Netanyahu entertained Mahmoud Abbas at his official residence for the first time since he took office 18 months ago. They began to grapple with core issues, despite Israel's earlier hesitation about doing so. Israel had wanted to begin with security concerns.

George Mitchell visited Syria to urge the Syrians to encourage the talks. A Kuwaiti paper reported that the Golan Heights would be returned to Syria over a period of some 10-15 years.

Netanyahu seemed to have been converted to the two-state solution, despite opposition in his own party.

SETTLEMENT FREEZE

However, the talks were overshadowed by the issue of a settlement freeze on the West Bank. The current 10-month freeze was coming to an end on September 26th. The Palestinians made it a condition of staying in the talks that the freeze was renewed and extended. As time went on, however, it became clear that the freeze was not going to be extended on the West Bank. It was also revealed that in early October plans would be discussed for 1362 homes in the Talpiot-Gilo area of Jerusalem.

Barak Obama offered inducements to Israel to extend the settlement freeze for 60 days. The US apparently said it would not ask Israel to extend the freeze beyond that but rather to deal with the settlements issue in the final status talks. They also offered to support Israel putting soldiers in the Jordan Valley after the Palestinian state was set up, to prevent arms smuggling, to provide Israel with advanced fighter jets and early warning systems. The Americans also undertook to veto any UN Security Council resolutions on the conflict. But Netanyahu, perhaps anticipating Obama would be weakened by the American mid-term elections, refused these offers.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon urged Israel to extend the freeze. President Mubarak of Egypt warned that a failure in the peace talks would lead to violence and terrorism around the world. But it was all to no avail.

So it was that the bulldozers began work again on West Bank settlements. It was distressing to learn that Foreign Christian Zionists celebrated the resumption of settlement building. Evangelical Christian Zionists from the US, Canada, Finland etc., raised their arms in praise, played tambourines and released many blue and white balloons (the colours of the Israeli flag) shouting "We love Israel." One Canadian woman was interviewed and said: "'We knew this was happening today, and we wanted to stand in support for all of Israel and God's land.'" When asked if she supported the Palestinians having their own land she admitted she was "not familiar" with politics!

In early December the US announced that it had dropped its campaign to urge Israel to extend the settlement freeze.

DECLARATION OF A PALESTINIAN STATE

Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad predicted that a Palestinian state would be established by next summer. Netanyahu warned against such unilateral action by the Palestinians. Saudi Arabia and Turkey are thought to be preparing to submit a resolution to the UN recognising a Palestinian state. Russia and France might be supportive. Ehud Barak warned Netanyahu that Obama is determined to see a Palestinian state and could allow the UN Security Council to recognize Palestine, although the Republican-dominated Congress would press him not to. The Palestinians are beginning to question whether the US is capable of achieving a peace settlement and Palestinian state if they can't even get Israel to make a temporary extension of the settlement freeze.

Now that the US has given up efforts to achieve direct talks, the Palestinians have acted on their intention to seek international support for a Palestinian state irrespective of the stalled peace talks. They approached the European Union who replied that they will do so “when appropriate.” Now the Palestinians are approaching individual European countries. Meanwhile Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay have recognised a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. It may well be that other South American countries and developing countries elsewhere will follow suit. It is even possible that we could witness a repeat of what happened in the UN in 1947 over the State of Israel but this time with a majority recognising a Palestinian State.

The US House of Representatives quickly approved a resolution opposing unilateral declaration of Palestinian statehood, saying that negotiations were the only way forward. US Middle East Envoy George Mitchell suggested that the US conducts a six-week period of confidential parallel talks with the Israelis and the Palestinians so that the US understands exactly what each side wants. However Arab foreign ministers and the Palestinians expressed disapproval of such talks unless the US is firm on the issue of settlements. The Palestinians also said the US must first agree to recognise a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders.

Netanyahu has said he is willing to discuss core issues in indirect talks, particularly the issues of refugees, security and recognition of Israel as a Jewish State.

The American administration is very frustrated with Netanyahu. After his stirring speech at Bar-Ilan University, the Americans offered Israel various inducements: fighter jets, entry into the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, support over the Goldstone report on the Gaza invasion and the fallout from the flotilla incident.

However Netanyahu didn't respond over the renewal of the settlement freeze. It is worthy of note that Hilary Clinton recently had a private meeting with Israeli Labour leader Tzipi Livni which sent out warning signals to Netanyahu. Netanyahu was afraid that his largely right wing, pro-settlement coalition would collapse if he extended the freeze. The Americans clearly feel that it might be necessary for this to happen and for Labour and Kadima to join the coalition, which would further the peace process. It is possible that the US is privately hoping the Latin American response together with a letter from 26 leading European politicians calling upon the EU to pressurise Israel will force Netanyahu into line.

RECOGNITION OF A JEWISH STATE

Another challenge to the peace talks was Netanyahu's demand that the Palestinians immediately recognise Israel as the state of the Jewish people. Israelis disagree over this tactic. Some see it as a necessary demand and would regard a Palestinian refusal as an indication they wanted to destroy the Jewish state.

Other Israelis see it as a tactic to prevent progress towards a Palestinian state and to lay the blame on the Palestinians because they are not willing to make such a recognition. These Israelis point out that Israel has been recognised as a Jewish State and refer to the UN resolution of 1947 to set up a “Jewish State” in Palestine. However they also raise questions about the implications for democracy of emphasising Israel as a Jewish state, since there are many non-Jewish citizens, including one and a half million Arabs. Such recognition by the Palestinians would effectively mean they were abandoning their call for the right of return of Palestinian refugees to what is now Israel. Little wonder the Palestinians have refused to make such a recognition.

EXTREMISM

Most Jewish people are decent people, as are most Arabs. Most Israeli settlers are also decent people and not at all the sort of people who burn Palestinian olive groves and trees, attack Palestinian farmers, destroy mosques and vandalize gravestones. Such actions are taken by extreme right wing settlers.

Amongst the extremists on the Arab side there are those who espouse violence and want to destroy Israel. The November Terrorism Risk Index published by global analyst Maplecroft places Israel in 14th place in the world (it was 17th in February) which means it is at “extreme risk.” However the Palestinian Territories are in 5th place. These figures compare with 33rd for the US and 46th for Britain.

It does not help that in October President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran made a speech in southern Lebanon, just two miles from the Israeli border predicting that Israel would disappear. This is a worrying development in Lebanon and a boost for Hezbollah.

There are also political extremists, of whom the most well-known is Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman who himself lives in a settlement. Recently Lieberman told the United Nations that Netanyahu is spreading illusions about peace which will not happen. Instead, says Lieberman, it is necessary to “exchange” population, i.e. to expel Israeli Arabs across the border in Palestinian areas. Incredibly, Netanyahu did not sack him but simply commented that he had not seen the speech in advance.

Then there are religious extremists including the Chief Rabbi of Safed Shmuel Eliyahu who produced a rabbinical edict, signed by 39 leading rabbis, forbidding the sale or renting of homes to non-Jews in Israel. Other rabbis condemned the edict saying it was contrary to the Torah. One critical rabbi wondered what Eliyahu would do if he heard of authorities outside Israel forbidding the sale or renting of homes to Jewish people. A number of leading figures in Israel demanded the signatories be suspended because they “trampled underfoot the pledges of the Declaration of Independence on which Israel was founded, turn Judaism into racism and openly break the law prohibiting incitement to racism.” The edict is deemed illegal but the Religious Services Minister Yaakov Margi himself belongs to the ultra-Orthodox Shas party and therefore may not take action.

SYRIA

The United States is seeking to restart talks between Israel and Syria. A Kuwaiti paper claimed that Netanyahu had told President Assad that Syria and Israel could reach an agreement within a year. Turkey, despite the difficulties resulting from the flotilla incident, has said it will do all it can to encourage such an agreement. The Israeli defence authorities favour withdrawal from the Golan Heights which indicates they think it will not adversely affect Israel’s security.

GAZA

In December Israel decided to allow more exports from Gaza to the West Bank and other countries. In recent months, Israel has approved seventy-eight projects in areas such as health, education, housing, infrastructure, water and sewage. These projects have been sponsored by foreign countries and international organizations. On the other hand, there has been violence including a recent IDF air strike on Gaza after a mortar attack from Gaza injured an Israeli.

Recently Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh has made an unexpected statement that Hamas would accept the result of a Palestinian referendum on a peace treaty with Israel. He said: “Hamas will respect the results regardless of whether it differs with its ideology and principles, provided it included all Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank and the diaspora.” He added: “We accept a Palestinian state on the borders of 1967, with Jerusalem as its capital, the release of Palestinian prisoners, and the resolution of the issue of refugees.”

PRAYER TOPICS

1. Pray for a resumption of peace talks despite refusal of Israel to freeze settlement development and of the Palestinians to recognise Israel as a Jewish state.
2. Pray for a real and practical desire for peace on both sides.
3. Pray against extremists on both sides who seek to wreck any peace talks.
4. Pray against racism on both sides including extremist politicians and rabbis in Israel and anti-Semitism amongst Palestinians and other countries.
5. Pray for the citizens of Gaza facing serious hardships.
6. Pray for security for Israelis, including from rocket attacks.
7. Pray that Israeli Arabs will experience in practice full equality as citizens.
8. Pray for peace between Israel and Lebanon.
9. Pray for peace between Israel and Syria.
10. Pray that Iran will not be able to develop nuclear weapons.
11. Above all, pray that more Jewish and Arab people will come to know the Prince of Peace this Christmastide.