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Prospects for Israeli-Palestinian Peace

by John D. Johnson

Will the Arab Spring turn into an Israeli-Palestinian Winter? Judging by the recent icy meeting between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu, there is a significant chance it may. Also, the proposed vote for recognizing a Palestinian state in the UN General Assembly this fall may well be the critical turning point in the seasons of Middle East politics.

As has happened many times before, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was in the news recently as Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu met with President Obama in the Oval Office, Egypt brokered a unity agreement between Palestinian groups HAMAS in the Gaza Strip and Fatah in the West Bank, and Israel celebrated its Independence Day while Palestinians marked what they call the “catastrophe” where many Palestinians circa 1948 left or were removed from their homes in present-day Israel, to name just a few headlines.

Traveling to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem last month, I was armed with two principal ideas. The first, conveyed to me through numerous conversations with Turks, Saudis, Palestinians, Pakistanis and others, is that there is no more important issue facing the region than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This issue has also been used widely by Islamist terrorists as part of their anti-Western and anti-Israel narratives. The second idea is that a two-state Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement is a real possibility; that both sides have the political will to seek peace that would benefit their long-term security interests. In essence, I was optimistic about the prospects for a lasting peace. However, after leaving Israel and having talked to individuals on all sides, I realize now that the problems are more complex and difficult to overcome than I had expected. I guess you could say I’m more realistic now.

The major issues are settlements, Jerusalem, refugees, security, water and borders. All deserve significant individual attention, but it seems unlikely that all will be resolved satisfactorily to both sides in any future peace agreement. A more pragmatic approach might be for the two parties to agree to several of the issues where the sides are less far apart, saving the most difficult issues for future negotiations. But therein lays the problem, peace negotiations first require talks and other preliminary contacts, none of which are occurring at the present time. Indeed, one could characterize negotiations as “stopped,” until such a time as conditions are set for talks to resume.

In contrast to the view of many of my Muslim friends and colleagues regarding the importance of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israel’s priorities, which are driven by threat perceptions, look much different. A sentiment conveyed to me by Israelis is that problems (i.e., threats) look differently through the lens of a small country. For perspective, it is less than 20 miles from the Mediterranean Sea to the West Bank. Israel sees internal and external threats, but the prevailing threat is external. A short list of threats from the Israeli viewpoint might look something like this: Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, HAMAS, Egypt (whose future looks stable but

remains uncertain) and then the Palestinians. Of course, with the Palestinian Authority (PA) now aligned with HAMAS, a terrorist group bent on Israel's destruction, it makes negotiations with the PA virtually impossible. On the Israeli side, the fact that approximately 15% of the Knesset, or parliament, is controlled by Jewish right-wing parties makes compromise with the Palestinians on almost any issue difficult.

Regarding Iran in particular, Israel clearly takes Tehran's nuclear ambitions and anti-Israeli rhetoric seriously. To appreciate Israel's perceptions about the existential threat posed by Iran, one must take into account the psyche of Israel's political and military elite, many of whom are older and have strong feelings about the existential threat faced by the Jews during WWII. Israel's leaders today feel immense pressure and responsibility to protect Israel.

Finally, the PA seems intent on seeking a United Nations General Assembly vote in September on Palestinian statehood and there seems to be significant international support in favor of a vote. Some are trying to delay the vote, but the likelihood that it will occur seems better than in recent memory. However, the conventional wisdom is that a General Assembly vote will not change the situation on the ground and that is probably the most likely scenario; Israel still occupies the West Bank and is the much stronger player militarily. Still, with Arab-spring emotions running high in the region, it is possible that a vote could result in real change and possibly increased violence.

As mentioned previously, the situation is complex and a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement akin to the Belfast Agreement, or Good Friday Agreement, achieved in Northern Ireland in the late 1990s will be difficult to achieve. However, looking to the future, a few things are clear. First, the Israelis and Palestinians are too wedded to their respective positions on all issues and an outside broker (with the U.S. playing a leading role) will be required to facilitate peace negotiations, probably followed by an international peace force. Second, both sides will have to compromise on their positions (e.g., Israel on land swaps, the Palestinians on refugees, etc.). Obviously, compromise is made difficult by the fact that neither party wants to be seen as conceding on key issues of importance to their supporters. Third, HAMAS will have to renounce violence and accept Israel's right to exist for peace negotiations to start or Fatah will need to break its unity agreement with HAMAS and then deal directly with Israel. Lastly, neighboring Arab countries will need to take a constructive role in the peace process, including offering economic assistance to the Palestinians and assisting with the refugee problem. Unfortunately, none of these actions will be easy, but all will be needed to form a lasting peace.

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