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The Unlikely Peace: Prospects for an Israeli-Palestinian Agreement in 2008

Featuring Amnon Lipkin-Shahak
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On June 26, 2008, The Washington Institute hosted the first annual Zeev Schiff Memorial Lecture on Middle East Security. The event, which discussed the prospects of peace between Israelis and Palestinians, featured Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, former chief of the general staff of the Israel Defense Forces. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

The peace process has been going on for fifty years. With the usual amount of frustration surrounding it, there is now both optimism and pessimism. On the positive side, the two leaders, Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority (PA) president Mahmoud Abbas, have regular and productive meetings with one another. Although these meetings are productive, most Israelis think there will not be a peace agreement by the end of this year.

Why are people so pessimistic? While Fatah believes in a two state solution, the group had two major failures in the past few years. First, it lost the election to Hamas in January 2006 because Palestinians were frustrated with Fatah's lack of reform -- something that still has not changed given the group's reluctance to purge the old guard. Then in June 2007, Hamas gunmen routed Fatah security forces and seized control of Gaza. The lack of charisma in the Palestinian political establishment is also causing some difficulty in getting the general population to support its mission. Without that support, is it realistic that Abbas will be able to negotiate on major issues such as Jerusalem, the right of return, and borders?

On the Israeli side, the prime minister and his government are under heavy criticism, and early elections seem likely. With a fragile coalition, a peace deal is more like a distant goal than a current reality, especially since the Shas Party is threatening to pull out if the issue of Jerusalem is even put on the negotiating table, let alone if the city is the subject of territorial partition. Israel will also need to perform the difficult task of stopping new settlement construction in the West Bank -- a necessity for peace -- as well as dismantle illegal outposts. Currently, it seems highly unlikely the government can undertake these tasks without facing serious difficulties in the Knesset and with the public at large.

Hamas, although not at the negotiating table, still plays a key role in a peace deal. Some say the organization is gaining power, but the agreed-to ceasefire may be out of weakness rather than strength. Hamas promised its people that it would gain independence through violence, but that policy has led to only misery. Since its takeover of Gaza, the organization has replaced Fatah in terms of corruption. Hamas members and officers are the only people with gas in their vehicles; they have the best jobs, and seem to be doing fine while the rest of the population struggles. Although it has made improvements in terms of law and order, Hamas does not offer much to the people. Considering these facts, it is debatable whether it has gained support since the election.

Hamas also seems to be quite strong in the West Bank -- with a great deal of political support and many weapons caches -- but the PA and the Israeli army have kept it under control. The larger question is where and when it will come out of the West Bank shadows. In Gaza, however, where Hamas is strong, there is

opposition from other Palestinian organizations. These organizations may challenge Hamas and its ceasefire, but Hamas will not accept any agreement between Palestinians and Israelis. If such an agreement were signed, Hamas would oppose it and renew violence, leading possibly to a Palestinian civil war.

In Israel, there is opposition to a peace agreement because many do not trust the PA. Even those who have always supported reconciliation with the Palestinians have begun to question whether Abbas and his colleagues can implement an agreement. At the same time, it should be said that PA prime minister Salam Fayad has done much good -- rebuilding the PA security apparatus and restoring law and order -- in select Palestinian cities in the West Bank.

There is also strong Israeli opposition to any peace agreement because it would mean the evacuation of West Bank settlements. The cost to pull out of the West Bank, not to mention security concerns and logistics, would be enormous. Economic concerns and infrastructure burdens need to be addressed on that front.

No agreement can be achieved without the PA implementing law and order in the West Bank and Gaza. There also needs to be a strong Palestinian central regime. Without granting the right of return to Palestinian refugees and without an end to Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank, it will be very difficult to move forward toward a peace agreement. Moreover, with weak leaders on both sides, it is doubtful that they can sign an agreement and survive politically.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Gerri Pozez.

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