

“Israel-Palestine in the New Political Configuration: Future Perspectives”¹

Reconciliation in the Israel-Palestine conflict is more remote today than anytime in the last 2 decades a more radicalised political culture has been creeping in, while regional ramifications have become more pronounced. In 2006 Hamas emerged as the winner in the Palestinian parliamentary elections and managed to incrementally extend its influence and popularity. In the course of the civil war with Fatah in 2007, Hamas brought the Gaza Strip under its control.

Since the turn of the year major developments have occurred - the war in Gaza, the Israeli elections, the reinforcement of Hamas in Palestine and the new American administration – will influence the processes in the region in the years to come. It is time to conduct a strategic reassessment of the region and to analyse possible scenarios, helping the parties to get out of the deadlock, build new opportunities for a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Current political Situation

Weak Leadership

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict with all its complexities, historical and emotional baggage has become a new 100 year war. The overall peace process stagnates. Neither the domestically weakened Israeli government nor the split Palestinian leadership are strong enough to negotiate any concessions and enforce a deal.

The Israeli elections on the 10th of February 2009 turned into a nip-and-tuck race between the “liberal-conservative” party *Kadima* under the leadership of foreign minister Livni and the “nationalist-conservative” *Likud*-block under the former Prime Minister Netanyahu. After

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coalition negotiations, the right wing under Netanyahu have organised a government coalition. Israel's political landscape is subject to fundamental re-adjustments the elections made obvious, on the one hand, the fragility of the Israeli political system; on the other, the disunity of the Israeli population, which voted under the impression of the three-week Israeli military offensive in Gaza and the lasting shadow of the summer war against Hezbollah, perceived by the population as a defeat. This may explain the shift towards more conservative hardliner parties during the elections.

On the Palestinian side the leadership question is still not resolved. After the civil war between Fatha and Hamas, attempts at reconciling the Palestinian leadership have failed. Since its Coup d'Etat in Gaza 2007, Hamas has been able to expand its power. It is appealing to the population, as it is less corrupt than the old Fatah structures and shows a strong dedication to reduce the Gaza population's misery by trying to provide basic services. Its terrorists handling and strong anti-Israel rhetoric, have resulted in an organised boycott from both Israel and the international community, yet, neither military nor economic sanctions (freezing of international financial assistance and trade blockage) proved to be effective in bringing it to reason. Hamas' steadfastness and consolidation of power, are forcing the International community to consider a change of strategy. For several experts time has come to talk to Hamas, leaving any precondition aside, just as it happened 15 years ago with the PLO. Israel should be courageous enough to take that step even with the uncertainty that Hamas will actually respond.

Iran

Iran is another major actor moving to the regional foreground. For Israel Teheran is erratic and perceived as *the* major threat in the region. The Iranian government pursues a strong anti-Israeli rhetoric and does not hide its regional ambitions. Teheran has close links to Syria and openly supports Hamas and Hezbollah in their war against Israel. Iran's strive for nuclear power is worrying Israel, its Arab neighbour as well as large parts of the International community.

Israel is counting on the new US government to increase the pressure on the Iranian government. In contrast to the former Bush government, Obama is expected to favour direct talks over a military solution. This might be, significantly influenced by his ability to convince the strong Israel lobby at home of the soundness of that strategy. If Obama starts negotiating with Iran, the pressure might well increase on Israel from whom will be demanded more "flexibility" in the Israel-Palestine peace process.

Syria

For Israel an improvement of its relationship with Syria would have positive effects on its security situation. The Netanyahu government has already hinted at engaging in that direction. This would not only enhance its international legitimacy but Israel also hopes that by engaging Syria to weaken the Iran-Syria link, thus Iran's linkage and ability to support Hezbollah and Hamas. The advocates of the Syrian track within Israel remain split, whether to pursue it on a bilateral level or as part of a comprehensive regional treaty. Beside Turkey, which already offered itself as a broker, US engagement in the process is needed. The Obama administration seems to favour a holistic regional approach, though, the exact contours of the involvement, bearing in mind its military engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq, the handling of Iran and the economic crisis, have yet to be articulated,.

Arab Peace Initiative (2002)

The Arab Peace Initiative proposed by Saudi Arabia at the Arab League Summit in 2002 is another vehicle for peace in the region. The initiative attempts at ending the Arab-Israeli conflict and normalising the relationship between Israel and its Arabic neighbourhood. In return it demands Israel to withdraw from all the Arab territories occupied since 1967, a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem based on the U.N. Resolution 194 and the establishment of a sovereign independent Palestinian state, with East Jerusalem as its capital. The Israel government has never formally rejected the initiative, but has expressed reservations. The non-negotiable nature of the initiative's provisions – which first must be accepted before any further dialogue can take place – presents a stumbling block to many in the Israeli government. The initiative bears some potential as it takes a regional and comprehensive approach, thereby departs from previous Arab positions. If it is accepted as a new point of departure, it may become a valuable vehicle for the peace process and the core element for a new regional security architecture.

International involvement and trusteeship

Another idea that has been floated is establishing an international trusteeship over the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The international community would take the responsibility to establish security, law and order and provide room for the (re)building of governmental institutions, which then would allow the Palestinian citizens to take the responsibility for their own affairs. The US, but foremost Israel, have been very reluctant to the concept as this would take away Israel's room of manoeuvre in its own security concerns. Today, Israel seems to be more open to such international involvement. On the Palestinian side, there are reservations towards the idea that others run their affairs, it will demand a lot of persuasion effort to have this Trusteeship accepted from both sides. No one can force Israelis

and Palestinians to make peace. The involvement of the international community in supporting the negotiation process is indispensable, left alone the climate between the two parties deteriorates easily and all peace advances are short-lived. US leadership remains essential in bringing the actors to the negotiation table, thereby, stimulating the peace process. The EU engagement will have to become more pronounced. The EU can assume a valuable role in the process of state and institution building. The US and the EU will continue to enhance close coordination of their policies towards the region. Even if the Israel-Palestine conflict may no longer constitute *the* chief conflict of the regional context, its settlement remains of major importance, the stalemate is weakening all other endeavours to address any of the other regional challenges.

Concluding Remarks

The discussions surrounding the Arab Peace Initiative as well as the recent developments make obvious the need for reassessing the peace process. Most solutions assume that the situation is static. However, actors are dynamic, as recent events demonstrate. The times of strong public figures symbolic gestures resulting in peace agreements, as in Oslo 1993, are over for the time being. A more likely scenario is the development of a long period of *détente* without a peace treaty with the settlement of a series of single issues. Both, Israeli security concerns, Palestinian feeling of injustice and demand for dignity need to be dealt with. The rhetoric and violent action from both sides is killing people's hopes; the peace movement's voice is barely audible, while insecurity, fear and frustration determine daily life. These factors not properly addressed and dealt with, stagnation of the current situation, i.e. the recurrence of minor but intensive clashes between the conflicting parties, will be the likely scenario for the foreseeable future.