

Peace Negotiations in the Middle East Should Not Be a Little Late this Year

by Michael Curtis



The saga is ended but the malady lingers on. In his address on February 20, 2018 at the UN Security Council meeting on the Middle East, Mahmoud Abbas, at 82 now in the thirteenth year of his four year term as President of the Palestinian Authority (PA) asserted that the United States was not an honest broker on issues concerning the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Washington, he said, had “contradicted itself and its own commitments, and has violated international law.” Abbas is not universally regarded as an expert on international law, and his reference to its violation apparently referred to President Donald Trump’s decisions to

recognise Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Israel and to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Rejecting the U.S., Abbas proposed that to solve the "Palestine question" it is essential to establish a multilateral international mechanism emanating from an international conference that should be held later in 2018.

The histrionic statement by Abbas was immediately put in a true perspective in four ways. First, his rejection of the U.S, was accompanied by his version of the Palestinian Narrative of Victimhood. Palestinian residents, he claimed, were the direct descendants of the Canaanites who lived in the land 5,000 years ago and continually remained there to this day. Whatever his other qualities, Abbas brought the dead to life, since the Canaanites, pagan idol worshippers, disappeared from history many centuries ago.

Secondly, he was followed to the rostrum by Danny Danon, Israel's Ambasssador to the UN who argued that the only way forward to end the conflict is direct negotiations between Israeli and Palestinian leaders. But, more important was the fact that Abbas walked out of the chamber when Danon began speaking, a vivid illustration of the Palestinian's lack of interest in rational discussion, and avoidance of direct talks with Israelis. As a consequence, Danon, with some justification, accused Abbas of being the problem, not part of the solution. He pointedly asked Abbas, "What have you done to better the life of a single person in Ramallah or Gaza?"

Another rebuke came from Nikki Haley, U.S. Ambassador to the UN, who insisted not only on the U.S. role as a key mediator but also that without it the Palestinians would get nowhere. The U.S. was ready to talk with Abbas: the choice she said is "yours but we will not chase after you." Haley also spoke sharply in reply to Saeb Erekat, the Palestinian "negotiator" who never negotiates, and who said that she should shut up and realise that the Palestinian leadership was not the problem.

Her reply was that she would not shut up and would speak some hard truths. Indeed she stated, the Palestinian leadership was the problem.

The third factor is that the Trump administration is indeed working on a peace plan, with which Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt, U.S. Special Representative for International Negotiations, are involved, and which is fairly well advanced.

The UN Security Council itself is not presently proposing a plan, but the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Process, Nickolay Mladenov, on February 20, 2018, an advocate of a two state solution, called on all sides to reject violence, and condemned terror. He explicitly replied to statements of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that settlement building is the best way to respond to Palestinian terrorism. Mladenov, a Bulgarian politician and diplomat, who once worked for George Soros, replied that settlement construction was not a morally appropriate way to respond to murder. He strongly denounced the expansion of the settlement enterprise as compensation for Israeli deaths. His practical suggestions were twofold: transfer parts of Area C, in the West Bank, from Israeli military control to the civil control of Palestinians; and the need for Palestinians to advance their institution building.

The essential problem with this kind of formulation, well meaning though it may be, is its equation of violence by both sides. But this has not been the case since May 1948 when five Arab armies attacked the newly created State of Israel. The starting point in genuine analysis is that the violence and the provocation comes from one side and is continuous. Moreover, the Palestinians justify and praise the violence as has been shown on many occasions, such as the remark after the September 26, 2017 attack on a settlement outside Jerusalem when an Arab killed three Israelis. The PLO Fatah leaders praised the work of this "martyr."

Only on a rare occasion has Abbas criticized Palestinian terrorism. In a phone call to Netanyahu he condemned the attack on July 14, 2017 on the Temple Mount, though he referred to the area as the holy Al-Aqsa mosque, when three Arab-Israelis killed two Israeli police officers and injured three others. A continuing concern is that the Palestinian Authority pays the stipends, some \$347 million, of families of security prisoners in Israeli prisons, or of perpetrators of violent attacks on Jews.

The key question is whether Israel has a serious Palestinian partner with whom to make peace? Even if Abbas is straightforward, which is questionable, the problem remains of Hamas which is trying to be part of the official Palestinian leadership. Hamas has ruled the Gaza Strip since 2007 after the civil war with rival Fatah over which group should govern the area with its 2 million people. Since then, Hamas has fought three wars against Israel, and has a heavily armed military wing of 25,000 with possession of a considerable force of rockets, and engaged in building tunnels to commit aggression against Israel.

Fatah and Hamas are still unclear whether as a result of negotiations the West Bank and Gaza will form a single political entity. On October 11, 2017, a meeting between the two groups, a kind of reconciliation, took place. Fatah was supposed to assume full control of the Gaza Strip by December 1, which in fact has not been done. However the PA did stop cutting off electricity supplies to Gaza, and stopped cutting salaries of government employees. However, in November 2017, Hamas formally relinquished security control of key crossings from Gaza to Egypt and Israel to the PA.

There are hopeful signs. Other countries, including France, Egypt, and Jordan, have sought an equitable solution to the conflict. French President Emmanuel Macron did suggest in December 2017 to Netanyahu that an Israeli freeze on settlement construction could be a helpful first step. On

February 15, 2018, Macron hosted in Paris a Palestinian-Israeli economic summit, in the attempt to reinforce mutual economic cooperation and maintain stability. Some agreement appeared to have been reached on a few issues; increasing commercial activities, investment, and Palestinian imports of consumer goods. Already in April 1994 France had brokered the Paris Protocol on economic relations , a form of customs union, between the two sides. According to it, Israel collects the import taxes and transfers to the PA the taxes on goods intended for the occupied territories. The PA can impose direct and indirect taxes, and set industrial policy.

Egypt can play a helpful political role as mediator, especially now it has made a major economic deal with an Israeli energy company, the Delek group. The agreement, a \$15 billion deal, is for Israel to supply an Egyptian company with 64 billion cubic meters of gas over the next decade. Delek is partnered with the Texas based Noble group which has developed Israel's offshore gasfields.

Politically, since President Abdel Fattah al Sisi came to power in 2013, Egypt and Israel have cooperated in action against ISIS terrorists in northern Sinai, and increased security cooperation. In addition, Israel already has a \$210 billion deal with Jordan to supply it with 6 billion cubic meters of gas.

The ghost in peace making presently is the issue of investigations in Israel concerning Netanyahu of allegations of corruption, bribery, acceptance of gifts, helping donors, trying to gain favorable press coverage of his actions. They may be a threat to his political survival, but it is uncertain at this point whether Netanyahu, now 68, is a "political corpse" or whether the allegations are a "witch hunt."

Yet, irrespective of the answer, Netanyahu's personal problems, or whether "the Netanyahu era is over" do not pose an obstacle to presentation of plans for peace negotiations and a solution

of a final status to end the conflict.

This is the opportunity for the Trump administration to press ahead with its proposals. While recognising that Israeli settlements in the West Bank may have complicated making peace, Trump is aware that Netanyahu, in spite of some rumors to the contrary, has not proposed legislation annexing any part of the West Bank. He is also aware of the pernicious and nonsensical remarks of Abbas at the UN that Israel was a "colony," and that Israel occupied "Palestine" in 1948, not in 1967. The moment of truth has arrived for the Trump administration to play a key role in helping to end the conflict.