

PEACE PROCESS
John Duke Anthony

Media hype to the contrary notwithstanding, specialist critics note that the visit of new Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak was noticeable for what it did not signal in the way of profound or fundamental changes in the substantive dynamics of the Middle East peace process. The premier's reputation is that of a warrior, not a peacemaker.

While near-term positive movement on the Lebanese and Syrian fronts is anticipated, whatever successes gained in either or both of those arenas is unlikely to alter significantly the increasingly dire prospects of major breakthroughs for the Palestinians.

The achievement of any Israeli agreement with Syria would yield Israel substantial capital with the United States and, also, with Lebanon. However, an accord with either or both of these countries would likely also provide cover for Israel's likely failure to make a stronger, more durable peace with the Palestinians. The political power of the latter - the power to determine what the Palestine Authority can and cannot do -- continues to be derivative of what the Israeli government will allow.

It is more than a matter of semantics to say that some of the harsher attributes of Israeli occupation may be replaced by conditions more akin to a siege. Palestinians may be empowered to move around more in the occupied territories. They stand to win increasing authority to educate their children, operate their own post offices, and provide a range of municipal and related services that Israelis are only too glad to divest themselves of the responsibility for administering.

Yet most Palestinians in the occupied territories are likely to remain overwhelmingly subject to Israeli rule on basic matters of sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity as well as procedures for exiting and entering - and the economic and other uses to which they might like to put -- the lands they inhabit.

Little noticed during the Israeli Prime Minister's visit was the brief convening in Geneva of delegations from among the 188 countries that are signatories to the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, which pertains to countries in occupation of territories acquired by force and is also applicable to governments that lay siege to peoples who are not independent.

Israel, long regarded world-wide as the premier violator of the Convention, boycotted the meeting. In so doing, it joined the United States and other signatories to the Convention that were pressured by the Clinton Administration, following Vice-President Gore's appeal to this effect at the annual convention of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee in June.

Meanwhile, Israeli and U.S. officials continue to stipulate that the peace process has nothing to do with UN Resolution 181 of 1947. Half of the Resolution, which provided for the partitioning of Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state, has never been implemented.

Moreover, neither has another key component of the Resolution come to pass. The latter component, included in recognition of the deep emotional and

spiritual feelings of Christians, Jews, and Muslims - half of humanity - called for a "corpus separatum" regarding Jerusalem.

Israeli and U.S. officials also insist that the right of return for the 750,000 Palestinian refugees who fled the fighting in 1948 is not on the table, although it is possible that some of the 250,000 additional Palestinian refugees that resulted from the June 1967 war may be repatriated.

Instead, the Clinton and Barak Administrations are holding fast to the position that the only operative U.N. Resolution in the current peace process is UN Security Council Resolution 242 and its reconfirmation in the form of UN Resolution 338. However, other than government officials and specialists, few appear to have read these resolutions, especially their preambles which stipulate that holding onto territory acquired by force is unlawful.

The Israeli position is that it has already withdrawn from "territories" occupied in the June 1967. The reference is to its withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula, which constitutes 93% of the Arab lands it invaded and occupied. Israel agreed to return the Sinai to Egypt as part of the 1979 Camp David Accords.

But this leaves out Syria's Golan Province, the Gaza Strip, and Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank, as well as the nine-mile wide "security zone" inside Lebanon which Israel has occupied since its invasion of Lebanon in June 1982.

The prospects for an enduring peace in the eastern Mediterranean, and the prospects for stability and economic prosperity elsewhere in the region, turn directly on the extent to which Israel withdraws from these remaining territories -- lands that the U.S., and the overwhelming majority of the world's other governments, continue to regard as occupied and subject to international law.

Barak's visit also failed to dispel the notion that there is little if any difference between Israeli and U.S. officials in their operative definitions of peace as regards Arabs and Israelis. Key foreign policy officials in both countries place greatest emphasis on the "process" of pursuing peace and the necessity of finding ways to accommodate the absence of war between the disputants.

In such an Israeli-U.S. dominated situation, the quest for "peace," from their side, becomes a quest for stability, for the strengthening of capital markets, investment, and regional economic cooperation, all of which Israelis, and most of their U.S. backers, believe can be achieved in the absence of armed conflict.

A peace thusly envisioned is not, however, what Martin Luther King, Jr. and many others have defined as peace. The late American civil rights leader defined peace -- a peace that is likely to endure -- as one that provides not only for reciprocal security arrangements between and among the parties, but, also, the presence of justice and, hence, a minimal amount of dignity for the main protagonists.

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