

Shaky Prospects for Peace

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 2, 2010 | Distinctly Catholic

The negotiations for Mideast Peace have begun anew at the White House. Despite the promising talk about how a deal can be reached within a year, the prospects of reaching the kind of deal that could actually work are as grim as ever. For all of our political difficulties here in the U.S., the politics of the Mideast are, simply put, a mess.

In this morning's Washington Post, [Hussein Agha and Robert Malley write](#) [1] about the asymmetries between the Palestinians and Israelis, which is a large impediment. As they note, the state of Israel has a strong central government capable of implementing and enforcing whatever deals might be reached in Washington. The Palestinian Authority has no such control over its own territories. In fact, it has no control over Gaza which remains in the hands of Hamas. Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas may desire peace, he may negotiate in good faith, but the people he represents have other desires, many of which are simply incompatible with whatever peace accord is attainable. As long as the Palestinians insist on half of Jerusalem, there can be no deal and it has not yet dawned on the Palestinian people that as long as they insist on half of Jerusalem, their hold on Nablus will be contingent on the agreement of the Israeli government.

There are other asymmetries, of course. Israel is a powerful nation, with a military that is the best in the world, subservient to civilian rule, a source and an expression of national unity. (Note to those who argue that the admission of gays in the military will destroy unit cohesion: The Israeli military permits gays to serve openly in its ranks.) Palestine is beset by militias with a variety of ambitions and little sense of nationalism except that which can be stoked by a common anti-Israeli posture.

At the table with Prime Ministers Netanyahu and Abbas will be their neighbors, President Mubarak of Egypt and King Abdullah of Jordan. Both men lead regimes that are corrupt, not only in the sense of cronyism, although they are also that. But, there is a deeper corruption too. Both men must be wary of the "Arab street," of those radical elements which might well be able to win an election if real elections were ever held. The same is true of other "moderate" Arab states like Saudi Arabia. The leaders of these states find ways to keep their populations from growing restive so that their leaders can build mansions in Aspen. Maybe their hold on power will last, maybe it will not. But, asking Israel to bet its security on the stability of these regimes is asking a lot.

The largest impediment may be the myths that continue to haunt the region. It is easy to see why Palestinians insist upon the right to return: The Jews took their land. Except, that is not exactly what happened. People forget how few people lived in what is now Israel when Zionism began to resettle Jews there. People also forget that there was no Palestine when Zionism began, as there was no Jordan. The region was part of the Ottoman Empire. The Kingdom of Jordan was created at the end of World War I and awarded to Abdullah's family after they lost their bid for control of Saudi Arabia. They have as much historical connection to the land they govern as I do with Idaho. I admire King Abdullah. He seems like a genuinely good man, as was his father. But, no matter how good his intentions or how successful his ability to shape his nation, I am not sure he can overcome the anti-Israeli myths that his people have come to accept as true.

Israel comes to the negotiating table with its own difficulties. Its parliamentary elections, and the governments

that result, are a hodge-podge of divergent interests. There is a kind of stability, just as the postwar governments in Italy, which seemed to fall with the seasons, had a kind of essential stability. Israel's negotiating stance is derived from a more or less consistent popular consensus among Israelis about what they are willing to do to achieve a lasting peace. Still, the power of a few members of parliament to create a crisis if a final settlement is not to their liking makes Netanyahu's negotiating position less than solid.

Hope springeth eternal. It is better that both the Israelis and the Palestinians, and the Jordanians and the Egyptians, are preparing for peace negotiations than preparing for war. Too many mothers on all sides of the conflicts have buried their children for war to be seen as an option. Furthermore, sometimes history surprises: You will search in vain for the political analysis circa 1985 that predicted the fall of the Soviet Empire by the end of the decade. But, the "Arab street" views martyrdom as a virtue and it views Israelis as the source of their self-inflicted social problems. While the leaders gather in Washington, the anger and rage back home haunt the proceedings.

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