

Sharm e-Shekh: Context and Perspectives

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More than four years ago, in October 2000, an international conference took place at Sharm e-Shekh. Its objective was similar to that of the conference that just ended now, namely to bring an end to the Intifada, and rescue the peace process from destruction. An agreement was eventually reached, but in spite of it being backed and endorsed by the world leaders present at the conference (Kofi Annan, Bill Clinton, Javier Solana, Hosni Mubarak and others), the agreement was soon to turn into a dead letter. Arafat was simply not interested in a cease fire, and he did not have the slightest intention to respect his signature.

The conditions under which the new cease fire has been decided are, however, far more promising. As the launching of the Arab-Israeli peace process in the 1991 Madrid International Peace Conference has shown, the prospects of peace in the Middle East always depended on a synchrony between global changes and regional conditions. With the election of George W. Bush to a second term in the White House, the prospects for a solution of the 125-year old Arab-Israeli conflict look somewhat brighter.

Notwithstanding America's difficulties in Iraq, the brutal determination of the president in pursuing his policies in the region, the threats to the stability of the Arab regimes emanating from Islamic fundamentalism, and their fear that the persistence of the Palestinian problem might end up dissolving their home front and undermining their regimes, and the change of leadership in the Palestinian Authority have all helped create more favourable conditions for an all-Arab accommodation with Israel. It is worth recalling that the endorsement in the spring of 2002, by the Arab League, of the Saudi initiative for peace with Israel was the Arab response to America's war on terror.

Another key to the reactivation of the peace process is Egypt. Ariel Sharon, who, unlike most of his predecessors, especially those of Labour, never courted the friendship of President Mubarak and never thought of making the traditional pilgrimage of Israeli leaders to Cairo to plead for Egypt's mediation with the Palestinians, succeeded nevertheless to warm up Israel's relations with the "rais." The latter even advised recently the Palestinians that "only with Sharon do you run a chance of having peace." Israel's planned pullout from Gaza, and the alarming prospects that this might create for Egypt an unstable common border with an anarchic Palestinian entity in Gaza, is a major reason for Mubarak's sudden infatuation with Sharon. Sharon's determination to use force mercilessly and unscrupulously, and his success in maintaining his intimate alliance with an American president who has just been reelected for a second term brought home to President Mubarak an unequivocal message: warming up relations with Israel, contributing to making possible its Gaza plan and exerting pressure on the Palestinians in favour of more pragmatic policies are all vital Egyptian interests. Not peace but the continuity of his regime is President Mubarak's priority, and this requires that he adapts his policies to the changing conditions.

A note of caution would not be misplaced, however, in assessing the chances that these improved conditions would necessarily usher in a permanent Arab-Israeli settlement. The Arab-Israeli peace process has known more than one moment of euphoria in the past; nor is this the first time that regional and global conditions looked so extremely favourable to the chances for peace, and indeed, the parties were more than once on the brink of peace. The Middle East is a cemetery of missed opportunities and promising peace plans. Today, the forces that might still derail the chances of peace have anything but laid down their arms. Iran's nuclear ambitions and its hostility to the Arab-Israeli peace process are major destabilizing factors. Iran's Hizballah clients have already

started to strike roots among radical Palestinian organizations in the territories in order to undermine the chances for a ceasefire or for a smooth execution of Sharon's Gaza plan.

The cease fire reached now at Sharm e-Shekh is a very fragile affair indeed. Israel made here a deal with the Palestinian Authority, not with Hamas which has not yet abandoned the military option. For Abu-Mazen to convince Hamas and the other grass roots militias to end the fighting he would constantly need concessions and incentives from Sharon. But, Sharon, however willing he might be to strengthen his new partner's bargaining position with Hamas, might not be able to do that because of domestic and political constraints. Contrary to the PA, which has now opted for a strategy of moving the Palestinian struggle from the Israeli buses and kindergartens to the negotiating table, Hamas is clearly aspiring to develop into a kind of Palestinian Hizballah, that is into a political party that joins the state institutions while maintaining at the same time an independent military option. If this becomes the case, the cease fire might simply not hold.

But the main challenge is that of the final political settlement. Sharm e-Shekh was not about the core issues of the conflict; it was rather a meeting between two exhausted parties looking for a break from a mutually devastating conflict by giving yet another chance to the political process. The Palestinian leadership is eager to move with Israel to the end game, to final status negotiations. They believe that only with a precise political horizon in their hands can they secure the cohesion of Palestinian society behind their peace strategy. Without a clear end game in sight, the Palestinian leadership will rapidly lose credit among the masses, let alone among the more radical political groups and militias.

But Sharon, fully backed in this matter by President Bush, is by no means ready to engage in an end game in the foreseeable future. The prime minister's imagination does not reach beyond the agonizing Gaza disengagement plan. A major risk for the future lies in that Sharon seems to be willing to resurrect the more negative legacies of Oslo. He would like to see a return to a step by step, piecemeal process, long and tortuous. He dreams of a series of interim agreements. But, these, as both Israelis and Palestinians know only too well from past experience, would become a standing invitation for all the enemies of the peace process to derail it. Opportunities to do so would abound. In fact, too long a process can be derailed even if it is paved with good intentions. The dysfunctionality of Israel's political system and the difficulties that Abu-Mazen might encounter in consolidating his position are always likely to defeat the peacemakers. We have been there more than once in the past.

My personal advise would be to move as quickly as possible to the outlining of the end game. Only thus can the pessimist culture of unilateralism and violent disengagement that has emerged throughout this Intifada be replaced by one of mutual trust and a civilized give and take. Sharm e-Shekh will go down in history as a major turning point only if the undeniable desire of both Israelis and Palestinians to put an end to the armed conflict is sustained by a clear peace vision. Such a vision does not exist, and the parties still conceive the parameters of the final deal on the core issues of the conflict in a way that is not coincidental. It is only when the parties will agree on a common peace platform, that is on the exact and precise destination of the voyage they are being asked to undertake along a road map for peace, that the prospects of the skeptics and the enemies of the process can be definitely wiped out.

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