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The Fall Middle East Meeting: Too Important to Fail

Dr. Abdel Monem Said Aly

In a speech delivered on July 16, 2007, President George W. Bush proposed a plan to implement his “vision” for resolving the Middle East conflict—a vision he had first presented in abbreviated form more than five years earlier, on June 24, 2002. The vision is based on the establishment of “two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side-by-side in peace and security,” as Bush put it in his July 16th remarks.¹ To achieve this goal, Bush asserted that in consultation with its partners in the Quartet—the EU, Russia, and the UN—the U.S. would take a series of steps to strengthen the forces of moderation and peace among the Palestinian people. These steps would include strengthening the financial state of the Palestinian Authority led by Mahmoud Abbas; enhancing the political and diplomatic commitment to “sketch out a ‘political horizon’ for a Palestinian state,”² and helping to build the institutions of the future Palestinian state.

Operationally, these steps are envisaged as part of a broader political process intended to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in a manner that ensures that Israel is secure and the resulting Palestinian state is viable and contiguous. The resolution of the conflict, it is assumed, requires a territorial settlement, with mutually agreed-upon borders reflecting previous lines of June 1967 and incorporating adjustments required by current realities. The launching pad for such an outcome, according to the American plan, will be the convening of an “international meeting,” as President Bush referred to it, this fall—a meeting that will bring together representatives of nations “that support a two-state solution, reject violence, recognize Israel’s right to exist, and commit to all previous

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agreements between the parties.”³ The meeting is to be attended by Israel, the Palestinians, and their neighbors in the region and will be chaired by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

The new initiative constitutes a continuation of long-standing American involvement in peacemaking in the Middle East, which has sought to advance or at least protect U.S. interests in the region. These interests include the free flow of oil, the security of Israel, the stability of the region and its protection from radical forces and states, the prevention of nuclear proliferation in the region, and, more recently, the integration of the region into the global economy through the spread of democratization and market economies.

Yet the President’s initiative also has three features worthy of notice. First, it represents a departure from the Bush administration’s earlier criticism of the heavy investment made by the Clinton administration in Middle East peace efforts. The new initiative seems to indicate an openness on the part of the Bush administration to a much higher level of involvement than it had previously entertained.

Second, the initiative calls for an international meeting, a step previously rejected by an administration that regarded the previous attempt at a comprehensive approach to resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict—the summer 2000 Camp David summit—as a failure. Finally, the initiative is designed to complement and balance other dimensions of American policy in the region, primarily the U.S. involvement in Iraq. In this context, it is consistent with one of the principal recommendations of the Baker-Hamilton (Iraq Study Group) report, which called for integrating a Middle East peace initiative into a strategy for exiting Iraq. On the other hand, the rising tensions between Iran and the United States and the world community over Tehran’s nuclear proliferation activities and its negative role in Iraq have made Washington feel that it is imperative to prepare the Middle East for a possible confrontation.

Reactions to the Bush Proposal

In the Middle East and elsewhere, the reactions to President Bush’s proposal to convene an international meeting ranged from lukewarm to negative and hostile. The objections expressed were as follows. First, on a substantive level, the gap between Israel and the Palestinians regarding all essential issues is seen as too wide for an agreement splitting these differences—let alone the subsequent implementation of such an agreement—to be possible. Second, the parties are seen as unprepared for serious negotiations. The Palestinians are deeply divided politically between supporters of Fatah and Hamas on the issue of peace, and between fundamentalists and secularists over the shape of a future Palestinian state; and Palestinians are geographically split as well, between two areas and two governments: one, in Gaza, led by Hamas; the other, in the West Bank, led by Fatah. On the Israeli side, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is regarded as not having sufficiently recovered from the war with Hezbollah in the summer of 2006; his political survival is seen as still awaiting the final report of the Winograd Commission, which was appointed by the Israeli government in September 2006 to investigate the conduct of the Second Lebanon War.

Finally, President Bush is seen as conducting a rearguard battle to salvage his legacy and reputation, which have been tarnished by the war in Iraq. In the region, the initiative is accordingly viewed as coming just as the President’s prestige and standing with the American people are at their lowest point—and the proposed

meeting is regarded, therefore, as perhaps amounting to nothing more than a “farewell party” for a much weakened presidency.

Yet the regional and global environment is unlikely to tolerate another failed Middle East diplomatic adventure. By now, fatigue from Middle East diplomacy has reached new heights, as the direct parties to the conflict have come to be regarded as having insufficient motivation to strike a deal. This judgment is based not only on the failed Camp David negotiations in the summer of 2000 but also on the record of the subsequent failures to implement the Clinton Parameters in December 2000, the January 2001 agreements reached at Taba, and the Quartet’s June 2003 Road Map to peace in the Middle East. All attempts to stabilize the situation between the Palestinians and Israelis, including the efforts to implement the Mitchell Commission’s recommendations (May 2001), the Tenet Plan (June 2001), and the proposals presented by retired U.S. Marine general Anthony Zinni (March 2002), have similarly failed. Instead, the level of violence between the two sides has reached unprecedented levels.

In the Arab world, in particular, the new Bush proposal was met with considerable skepticism with respect to its credibility and seriousness. Arab media accused the U.S. of attempting to maneuver Arab countries into helping it in Iraq while obtaining a cover for continued Israeli occupation of the Palestinian and Arab territories captured in 1967. In addition, Egyptian official circles accused the Bush administration of failing to prepare sufficiently for the proposed meeting. Officials in Riyadh, for their part, stated that Saudi Arabia would not participate unless it was assured that permanent status issues—that is, the issues at the core of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict—would be discussed. In many quarters, the convening of an international “meeting”—rather than a peace conference like the one held in 1991 in Madrid—and its being chaired by the Secretary of State rather than the President are viewed as signifying a less than serious American commitment to the success of the initiative.

Proposed Alternatives

In light of the aforementioned objections and reservations, the prevailing view in the Middle East regarding the proposed “meeting” is that it will turn out to be no more than another exercise in futility. That perception has led to suggestions of various measures to empower and unify the divided Palestinian Authority led by Mahmoud Abbas. The purpose of such proposals is to enlarge President Abbas’s political base in preparation for a deal that will eventually be presented to the Palestinian people in a referendum. The two parties, the Israelis and the Palestinians, are seen as requiring

additional confidence-building and stabilization measures in the framework of a *hudna* (a cease-fire or armistice), in order to create an environment that would facilitate the strengthening of a Palestinian leadership and the election of an Israeli government ready to make peace. This in turn, it is hoped, will create conditions more conducive to peace once a new administration in Washington, D.C.—one not tainted by the legacy of the war in Iraq and not bruised by the failures in the “war on terror”—takes office in early 2009.

Yet the alternatives proposed do not seem to have any better chance of success than the proposed fall meeting. Most of these suggestions have been attempted in the past and have failed. No improvement in the Palestinians’ “quality of life” can take place in the absence of peace, and in the face of continued “occupation,” with all that is associated with that in human and security terms. The experience of the past decade and a half attests to the fact that providing the Palestinians with opportunities to improve their quality of life is to no avail as long as they remain subject to retaliation for terrorist attacks and their lands are cut off from each other by settlements, roads, and checkpoints.

Creating a Palestinian unity government has also been attempted in the framework of the Mecca accord between Fatah and Hamas, resulting in complete paralysis and, ultimately, the division of Palestinian lands between Gaza and the West Bank. Likewise, all attempts to apply confidence-building measures have led only to greater mistrust among the parties and increased mutual hate.

On the other side, what might be the result of future electoral changes in Israel? Presumably either a Labor-centered government led by Ehud Barak—with his dubious record at the 2000 Camp David Summit—or an anti-peace government led by Benjamin Netanyahu. One thing these two Israeli leaders share is a track record of failure, whether in implementing partial agreements or in attempting to reach a comprehensive peace. There is no guarantee, then, that the passage of time will result in greater prospects for peace, in either Israel or Palestine.

The Case for the Fall Meeting

There is yet another lesson in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict: namely, that there has never been a “good time” for a negotiated settlement or an environment conducive to peace. There are always forces in Israel as well as on the Arab side who regard peace as not only impossible but also undesirable—on religious, historical, or geopolitical grounds. On the Israeli side, many wish to continue the occupation forever; on the Palestinian side, there are many who wish to continue “the struggle” to the end of history.

Yet the consequences of not convening the proposed meeting, will surely prove even worse. The two major breakthroughs in the history of Arab-Israeli peacemaking—the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty and the Madrid/Oslo processes—both came in the worst of times, in terms of the stature of the leaders involved and the broader regional and international conditions. In 1977, President Anwar Sadat's popularity was at its lowest point; Prime Minister Menachem Begin was seen as a dogmatic right-wing leader; and President Jimmy Carter had earlier confessed to Sadat that he could not do anything to help resolve the conflict. Similarly, in 1991, PLO Chairman Yassir Arafat was significantly weakened by his decision to associate himself with Saddam Hussein in the aftermath of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the run-up to the Gulf War—a war that had shattered the stability of the region. At these junctures, the aforementioned leaders looked at the abyss and decided that some alternative—a completely different approach to resolving the conflict—had to be found, and pursued, to avert catastrophe.

In the Middle East, the choice has never been between good and bad alternatives; instead, it has been between bad and much worse alternatives. Worst of all has been the creation of a diplomatic vacuum, in the absence of a peace process or any kind of political horizon within which peace can be attainable. In such an environment, anti-peace forces thrive, the domestic problems of each party are exported to the other, and external radical forces intervene, further intensifying and escalating the conflict. Under present conditions this is exactly what will happen if the proposed meeting either fails or is not convened. This is especially the case given the expectations created by President Bush's decision to make his initiative public.

In such an environment, the alternative to a successful meeting in the fall is a much more violent status quo. Hamas and other radical Palestinian forces will turn from criticizing the meeting to criticizing the peace option itself as testimony to the "surrender" and "appeasement" inclinations of the Abbas/(Salam) Fiaid-led Palestinian Authority. Rockets will be launched with far greater frequency and intensity to underline the difference between "resistance" and "collaboration." Hamas will surely attempt to overthrow the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank; even if it fails to do so, it will likely succeed in creating a degree of chaos and paralysis that will ensure growing anger and despair. This, in turn, will breed suicide bombing and other forms of violence. Israel will not only retaliate; politically, it will move dramatically to the Right—a move likely to be coupled with more intensified use of force, greater settlement construction, and rough punitive measures applied against a Palestinian population that has already experienced great suffering. In short, Palestinian-

Israeli relations will revert to something like their worst moments, and the moderate camps—which accept and favor peace based on a two-state solution, and continue to constitute majorities on both sides—will vanish.

Although such renewed violence would not be new, at this time it would be likely to have a considerable impact on the two wars America is currently waging: the war on terror and the war in Iraq. As the situation in Afghanistan becomes increasingly precarious and the situation in Iraq remains uncertain at best, another resumption of large-scale Palestinian-Israeli violence will not only empower new sets of *Jehadis*; it will also negatively affect the "surge" strategy in Iraq. An important dimension of the latter is an attempt to moderate the Sunnis inside and outside the country. Inside Iraq, the U.S. has empowered Sunni tribes to fight Al Qaeda terrorist forces; outside Iraq, it has worked to create a moderate camp that includes the GCC states plus Egypt and Jordan in addition to the United States. The group has held five meetings during the past year to discuss Middle East issues, particularly those related to Iraq, Iran, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Convening this group led to the reincarnation of the Arab Peace Initiative during the Arab Summit held in Riyadh in March 2007.

These moderate forces will experience considerable stress once the Palestinian-Israeli confrontation flares up again. The Arab Peace Initiative will be shelved once again, as was the case after the suicide bombing at the Park Hotel in Netanya in March 2002 and Israel's subsequent reinvasion of the main metropolitan areas of the West Bank. Iran, Hezbollah, and Al Qaeda will celebrate, and moderate Arab states like Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia will assume defensive positions, as they will not be able to afford being associated with Israel and its supporters. As a result, the critical balance created during 2007 between moderates and radicals in the Middle East will shift again, this time in favor of the radicals, revolutionaries, and religious fundamentalists. The American attempt to build a coalition of moderate powers under its leadership—the GCC countries plus Egypt and Jordan—will be difficult to bring to fruition. This will seal America's defeat in Iraq at a time of looming confrontation with Iran over its nuclear capability and the latter's heavy intrusion into Lebanon as well as into Iraq itself.

What Is to Be Done?

There is, therefore, no real alternative: The fall "meeting" must be convened and must succeed. So far, however, there have been no signs of serious American efforts to guarantee such a result. The best that the Bush administration seems to hope for is that President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert will reach agreement on a document—a framework

for peace or a declaration of principles—that will be ratified by a much larger international and Arab gathering. This bottom-up approach places the fate of the Middle East, as well as U.S. and global interests, in the hands of Israel and the Palestinians—the least prepared parties, and the most constrained.

It is time for Middle East peacemaking to complement such an approach with a top-down effort that begins with the creation of a regional and international consensus over a framework for peace that is based on a combination of the Clinton Parameters and the Arab Initiative, making the two inseparable. (Both have been accepted by the parties to the conflict in the past, even if with some reservations.) By assuming such a role, the international community will be reasserting its commitment to a two-state solution that it first adopted when the UN approved, on November 29, 1947, the resolution proposing the partitioning of Palestine. In addition, the international community should help resolve the major sensitive issues that have defied agreement between the two parties, primarily the status of Jerusalem and the Palestinian refugees. The principles upon which these hypersensitive issues should be resolved are that Palestinian refugees will return to the new Palestinian state and Jerusalem will become the capital of both states, on the basis of placing the Arab and Jewish quarters under Palestinian and Israeli sovereignty, respectively. Neither side will have sovereignty over the holy places, but both will acquire guardianship: the Palestinian state over Haram al-Sharif and Israel over the Western Wall.

In elaborating specific and detailed suggestions for resolving these “permanent status” issues, the Bush administration and the international community at large can make use of a wealth of ideas and proposals that have been produced by think tanks, NGOs, and other groups of concerned individuals, including those that have emerged from so-called “Track II” diplomacy, such as the Geneva Accord and the Ayalon-Nusseibeh Statement of Principles.⁴ These comprise different guidelines and blueprints for addressing the core issues of the conflict, based on the progress made at the summer of 2000 Camp David Summit, the Clinton Parameters, and the subsequent negotiations at Taba.

In creating an international consensus around such proposals, the U.S. would benefit from the new political environment in Europe, where two leaders, Angela Merkel of Germany and Nicolas Sarkozy of France, are much closer to Washington’s approach to the Middle East than their predecessors. Such an approach will also appeal to moderate forces in Israel and among the Palestinians who accept a two-state solution. The United States will also benefit from the current isolation of Hamas in Gaza, which on the one hand has freed the Palestinian Authority from

the pressure that Hamas exerted in the framework of the previous National Unity Government, and at the same time has created another alternative, and a peaceful one, to Hamas’s obstructionist politics.

Ultimately, Israel and the Palestinian Authority will have to negotiate directly the details and modalities of any bilateral agreement and will be asked to subject the agreed-upon framework to a popular vote. Continuing to isolate Hamas is necessary if it is to be prevented from meddling in the affairs of the West Bank, at least until such a referendum takes place. But first, the fall meeting must endorse such a framework and define the responsibilities of the regional and international parties in the process. In so doing, it should engage two agendas: the first dealing with the territorial issues that resulted from the June 1967 war between Israel, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon; the second focusing on the future of the Middle East—Israel included—in the realms of security and economic progress. The two agendas will constitute a diplomatic translation of the Arab Initiative. *They will be explored simultaneously in a well-constructed, internationally supervised series of negotiations that will continue until a Palestinian-Israeli peace treaty is concluded.*

As such a process develops, the role of the United States will remain crucial. U.S. Middle East diplomacy works best when its President is engaged and mobilizes his country’s formidable economic and political assets. Under the current administration, this has yet to take place. Indeed, President Bush seems to have distanced himself from the proposed meeting for fear of failure, leaving it to his Secretary of State to chair. Yet this is unlikely to mitigate the consequences in case of failure; in the region and domestically, responsibility for a failed meeting will be assigned to the President of the United States. Hence, instead of attempting to avoid the consequences of the meeting’s possible failure, it would be far wiser for President Bush to devote his energies to ensuring its success. Downgrading the initiative from an international peace conference to a “meeting” of concerned parties has already diminished some of its legitimacy and the impact of its possible results.

President Bush should be coordinating the proposed meeting’s agenda with European powers—the UK, France, Germany, and Italy—and with Russia. Relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia should also be improved; they currently remain tense owing to the administration’s drive to democratize the region and the Egyptian-Saudi demand for Syrian participation. Yet the two countries are crucial to the success of any American diplomatic undertaking in the Middle East. This continued tension is particularly unfortunate given that Egypt and Saudi Arabia share many

interests with the United States, most importantly those related to fundamentalist pressures and to Iranian moves in the region.

Though by the mid-1970s the Arab-Israeli conflict had moved from its “existential” to its nonexistent phase, there are forces on both sides who would like to return it to that previous state of affairs. These forces are operating not only in the Arab-Israeli realm but also in the Middle East theater at large. A successful meeting in the fall would strike a blow at these forces and create a more hospitable environment for the resolution of other Middle East conflicts, from Lebanon to Iraq. For this to take place the participation of Syria is essential, not only to prevent Damascus from attempting to undermine America’s efforts, but also in order to ensure that any peace that is attained is a comprehensive one. It will be equally important for U.S. diplomacy to add to the geopolitics of the conference a significant dose of geoeconomics, and to combine immediate problem-solving with the suggestion of future horizons worthy of engagement and cooperation.

Final Thoughts

Once again, an attempt at United States diplomacy in the Middle East will soon be tested. The region is a highly complex entity, with the Arab-Israeli conflict at its heart. Regardless of what other measures the U.S. takes to advance its other interests in the region, Washington should not forget that reaching a comprehensive peace between Arabs and Israelis can serve those same interests. Failing to do so will complicate, and damage, America’s other endeavors.

With Middle East peacemaking, there are no guarantees for success. The only sure thing is that the absence of efforts to achieve peace breeds an environment conducive to war. Currently, the region is sustaining two major wars, one in Afghanistan and the other in Iraq, and harboring a number of failed states (Somalia, Sudan, Lebanon), with the dangers of terror and fundamentalism looming. The Middle East cannot sustain a new theater of confrontation. For this reason, the proposed fall meeting is a commendable step. It remains to be seen, however, whether the Bush administration will take the steps necessary to make the meeting successful.

Endnotes

1. See President George W. Bush. "The President Discusses the Middle East." The White House. Washington, D.C., July 16, 2007.*
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. See Israeli Policy Forum, *A Guide to a Successful November International Conference*. September 26, 2007.*

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