

On Proximity Talks
By Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi
Jerusalem
25th May 2010

The proximity talks that marked its first round last week between the United States, the Palestinians and Israel were heavily influenced by the internal and external political dynamics of each of the respective direct stakeholders of the conflict: Palestinians and Israelis on the one hand and the United States, the European Union and the Arab States on the other.

The current policy of the United States comprises of three positions: first, there is the imperishable American and European concern to maintain an official recognition of the security of Israel as a State in the Middle East – from a US perspective, this official legitimate and recognized venue keeps the peace process alive. The second stance is to maintain and secure the Palestinian secular movement of Fateh headed by Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) as the officially accepted partner to negotiate and sign on behalf of the Palestinian people. The last but not so obvious position and on the Washington agenda is the underling desire to “shake” Netanyahu’s right wing coalition government; “If we cannot change Israel we can change Netanyahu”. This does not come as a surprise; especially in the absence of president Obama’s strategy for a final solution. Hence only tactic can be used at this stage to face the vanity, arrogance and stupidity of Netanyahu. This is more so with Netanyahu’s surreal delusion of power which has been fed by the support of the Jewish Lobby in the United States, the rising number of the Jewish Orthodox Generals in the Israeli military establishments, the half million settlers in the West Bank and the weakness of his opposition in the Knesset: the Kadima Party as well as the Labor party.

However, without an active Role in the Middle East, The US runs the risk of negatively affecting its strategic interests including oil and fighting “terrorism” (Al-Qaida and Taliban),. Therefore, it must resolve the Palestine question and address Islamists and fundamentalists in the region, Therefore, according to American Generals serving in the region, the US must intervene at least at this stage through public diplomacy with Syria, Lebanon, and Iran, including these proximity talks, to strike a balance between the pressure of the Jewish Lobby and Netanyahu’s “obsession” of attacking Iran on the one side, and the stability of the Arab regimes and the human element of the suffering of the Palestinian people on the ground on the other.

The second main stakeholder, represented by the PLO – PA headed by Mahmoud Abbas, is in favor of these proximity talks and the small carrots to be gained in the West Bank. Firstly their main benefit out of these talks is the “isolation” of their rivalry with Hamas. Secondly, these consultation talks maintain the legitimacy and the recognition of the authority of Mahmoud Abbas as long as the Palestinians are divided geographically and ideologically. Thirdly, it keeps the window of hope in the public domain of the two-state solution on the borders of 1967. Finally, it keeps the European donors’ mission in supporting PM Salam Fayyad’s agenda (Institutional building and filling the political and economic vacuum in the West Bank).

The third main stakeholder is Israel, whose position in these proximity talks may be complex to handle since Israeli PM Netanyahu clearly wants a battle with Washington, constantly putting his “NO”s on the table as a precondition to these talks:

- a. No to freeze constructions in United Jerusalem;
- b. No to halt settlement expansion in the West Bank;
- c. No to withdrawal to 1967 borders especially from the Jordan Valley;
- d. No to lift of the siege on Gaza Strip, and transferring into becoming an Egyptian Problem.

However, George Mitchell, the US special envoy keeps knocking on the door of Netanyahu as a show of political presence, but pressure will, without a doubt, have an impact on the Israeli general public opinion and the moderate part of the Israeli political arena. Therefore, for the first time we witness in this first round of talks the introduction of ideas for the transitional phase such as land swap, NATO forces to separate Palestinians and Israelis on the West Bank as well as suggestion to bring Arab troops headed by Egyptians to enter Gaza for the Palestinian reconciliation and security reform between Fateh and Hamas.

With the aforementioned varying dynamics and conflicting interests, the question remains; where does this leave the situation today? The Palestinian side asserts that the first round is to clarify the position of both parties on two core issues:

1. The Borders of 1967
2. Security “ On the day after”

On the Borders issue, the US, the EU, Arab States and the Palestinians – both Fateh and Hamas – are all in agreement that the formula for a ‘settlement’ is through a *Two-State Solution* based on the borders of 1967. That is the 1949 truce lines. As for the Netanyahu government, it is the separation wall, the Jordan valley, which is 26% of the West Bank, and the half million settlers in the West Bank as well as the recognition of Israel as a Jewish State with Jerusalem as its capital.

On the security issue, we are witnessing US and EU investments in the education, training and reconstruction of the Palestinian security apparatus in the West Bank. However, still pending is whether these funds will be augmented to include the Gaza Strip for the purpose of security reform and reconciliation. More importantly, is whether there would be agreement on ending the Israeli Military Occupation and dismantling the settlements on the West Bank.

Netanyahu’s response is that the normal growth of the settlements shall be accepted! The Israelis reassert that the question of Jerusalem is a closed file and there is nothing to be agreed upon. However, Netanyahu is inviting Palestinians for what he called “Economic Peace”.

President Abbas started his meeting with George Mitchell by complaining that the settlements activities did not freeze but rather increased to include Jerusalem. The continuous atrocities of the Israeli military establishment in the West Bank in terms of killing and arresting people, the demolition of houses every day both in Jerusalem and in Areas A and B of the West Bank, will end the talks before starting it.

On the following day, Netanyahu answered Mitchell by saying that he did not promise the US anything and there were no assurances or guarantees. His position would be maintained

as long as there are no direct negotiations. “Netanyahu is a Maestro of tactics and political survival”.

In other words, there may be no concrete change on the ground today that would meet Palestinian expectations; just another demonstration of US public diplomacy keeping US political and military presence in the region visible through active usual protagonists. The proximity talks are hence held hostage to the political dynamics in the region; i.e. the war of words between Syria and Israel; the military maneuvers both in Israel and Iran; the French and German foreign ministers calling on Syria not to support Hezbollah of Lebanon; and finally the Egyptian head of Intelligence Omar Sulaiman’s visit to Tel Aviv in an attempt to extinguish the fire before it irrupts. This is in term of how to deal with the Turkish Solidarity Ships in support of the Palestinian People in Gaza in an attempt to lift the three-year siege.

To summarize the current state of affairs in Palestine and in the region, one can say it is “containment management of crisis and not solving the conflict”. However, only those that can read between the lines know that. However, this is only a curbing of the inevitable.