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2008: The Year Of Palestine?

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Will 2008 see the creation of a Palestinian state, or will November's Annapolis peace conference prove another false dawn?

US President George W Bush shows no inclination to become a lame duck, pledging no let-up during his last year in office.

He is due to visit the Middle East early in 2008, a sign of his personal commitment to advancing the peace process there.

But he will not find it easy to cut through the scepticism that is widespread in the region.

With the problems of Iran, Iraq and Lebanon unresolved, few believe the Middle East is going to become more stable any time soon.

Stagecraft or statecraft

Veteran US peace envoy Dennis Ross is left wondering whether the Annapolis peace conference, which Mr Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice hosted in November, was stagecraft or statecraft.

Addressing a conference organised in December by the Transatlantic Institute, a Brussels think-tank, he questioned whether the Bush administration was sufficiently engaged to bring about a meaningful peace process.

There had to be real change on the ground, he said, for people to believe peace was coming.

At Annapolis, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas pledged to start continuous negotiations, with the aim of bringing about a two-state solution by the end of 2008.

But can they meet this ambitious goal?

David Makovsky, of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, says that for the first time we have an Israeli and a Palestinian leader who trust one another.

Time wasting

But many observers argue they are both politically too weak to make the hard compromises peace requires.

Avraham Sela, an Israeli academic and former intelligence officer, thinks it counter-productive to exclude Hamas, the Islamist movement which now runs Gaza.

In his view, the Palestinian Authority run from the West Bank by Hamas's great rival, Fatah, is virtually dead - and efforts by the West to resuscitate it are a waste of time.

The conference debated other challenges ranging from demography to nuclear proliferation.

Sir Mark Allen, a former British diplomat, pointed out that by 2050 the population of the Middle East will have grown from 430 million to 720 million.

Will the young prove co-optable by dynasties resistant to change?

Off the table

Steven Cook, of the Council on Foreign Relations, assessed the meagre results of the Bush administration's promotion of democratic reform in the region.

But in his view there could be no going back to uncritical support of authoritarian regimes. George Bush's successor, whether a Democrat or a Republican, would find the issue still firmly on the foreign-policy agenda.

Speakers evinced little optimism about either Iraq or Iran.

There was a real risk the so-called "surge" in Iraq would buy short-term success at the expense of long-term gains, according to Michael Rubin, a neo-conservative at the American Enterprise Institute.

One of his colleagues, Reuel Marc Gerecht, said the new US intelligence estimate on Iran had "demolished" the administration's policy - and meant that a military strike against Iran was

now "off the table".

Wrapping up the conference, Lebanese analyst Kassem Jaafar saw no reason why Iran was likely to change course - and warned of the danger that the fledgling peace process initiated at Annapolis would prove another missed opportunity.

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