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Pointless and depressing

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Last week, representatives of the Quartet met with Israeli and Palestinian negotiators and declared they had extracted a commitment from both sides to submit their final status negotiating positions on borders and security within three months. Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat proceeded to deny any such Palestinian commitment, while Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Mahmoud Abbas intimated he might soon consider dissolving the Palestinian Authority.

On the Israeli side, interest in the Quartet declaration was so low that it was ignored by all the major media. And Israel again turned down an American request for a temporary freeze on settlement construction.

Whatever the Quartet says or does, it appears to have lost all credibility in both Israel and Palestine.

The reasons are multifold, and profound. It behooves the policy-making echelon of the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations--who make up the Quartet--to take note of these factors if the international community's Middle East peace efforts are again to be relevant.

First, and most significantly, the Quartet's four members are still advocating a peace format, Oslo, that has failed two serious attempts (in 2000 and 2008) to produce mutually-acceptable solutions for the final status issues. It's time for the Quartet to take the lead in reassessing the entire Oslo process and its suitability to a rapidly changing Middle East environment.

Second, the Quartet persists in ignoring the obvious hawkish and anti-two-state composition of the Netanyahu government in Israel. The incompatibility of that government with a genuine peace process should have been obvious from the outset, more than two and a half years

ago. Yet so blind is the Quartet's behavior that Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu is able repeatedly to thumb his nose at the international peacemakers by advancing key building projects in East Jerusalem or the West Bank without risking anything more than a mild verbal rebuke.

Third, the Quartet ignores the clear signals sent out by Abbas to the effect that he no longer has any faith in negotiations with the government of Israel and prefers an international track at the UN. This is not just about Netanyahu and his posturing and maneuvering; Abbas' loss of faith began in response to the far-reaching peace proposal he received and rejected back in 2008 from then-prime minister Ehud Olmert. Abbas now appears to understand that his own position on the pre-1967 negotiating issues, the holy basin and the right of return--to the effect that there is no Jewish people, the Jews have no historic national rights in the Holy Land and the state of Israel was "born in sin" in 1948--is incompatible with that of any self-respecting Israeli leader. Against this backdrop, Abbas' ostensibly troublesome UN move should be seen by the Quartet as a potentially promising initiative that could be leveraged into a win-win proposition, rather than an attempt to sabotage peace.

Fourth, the key member of the Quartet, the Obama administration, has signaled very clearly that for the duration of the coming election year it will not commit to any Middle East peace process that could conceivably bring it into a serious clash with Israel.

The Quartet seemingly remains oblivious to all these facts, insights and lessons of recent history, even when they are elucidated and explained to the relevant Quartet officials by their own analysts. Understandably, it is difficult after 18 years of institutional and ideological investment in the Oslo process to contemplate the need for a new peace model. Here we need only look at the Israeli peace camp, which seemingly misreads the situation just as badly. The only difference is that the Quartet appears to have a life of its own, while the peace camp's legions are dwindling rapidly, thereby assuring the ongoing survival and stability of the Netanyahu government.

The situation could be different. Those seriously interested in advancing a two-state solution must reevaluate the demise of Oslo, factor in the core reasons for Abbas' UN initiative, and set about fashioning a new, post-Oslo two-state paradigm based on a "win-win" approach. The coming year could be exploited far better toward that end than through pointless and increasingly depressing Quartet resolutions and visits.-Published 31/10/2011 © bitterlemons.org

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