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What should we take away from the ?Palestine Papers??

Media Mention of Ghaith al-Omari in PBS - January 26, 2011 - 1:00am

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In recent months, peace talks between the Israelis and Palestinians have been fitful, to say the least. There was reason for hope when President Obama took office two years ago promising a recalculation of American foreign policy. By the time his administration restarted the negotiations in September, however, veterans of the peace process were skeptical that progress could be made.

Now, just four months later, even the most optimistic observers have reason to be despondent.

Internal documents leaked to Al Jazeera and published this week reveal an unvarnished look at the last decade of the negotiations, including a number of unprecedented concessions offered by the Palestinians that seem to undermine the Palestinian Authority's public posture. Longtime Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, for example, promised publicly in 2009 that ?there will be no peace whatsoever unless East Jerusalem ? with every single stone in it ? becomes the capital of Palestine,? even though he had already privately offered to cede all but one of East Jerusalem's Jewish settlement to the Israelis, according to the memos.

If the American-led ?peace process? ? which historian Juan Cole derided on Monday as a ?sham? ? somehow survives these revelations, perhaps the officials involved in the talks can learn something. As it turns out, few if any of the supporters on either side were surprised to learn that the Palestinians had made significant ? some say unconscionable ? concessions to the Israelis, including most East Jerusalem settlements and the right of as many as 5 million Arab refugees to return to Israel.

?This is a principle that was accepted by our side at that point, and has been the foundation for the negotiations since then. So that to me is not surprising at all,? Ghaith al-Omari, a former aide to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and negotiator at the 2000 Camp David Summit, said of the proposed division of East Jerusalem. ?Definitely, for those of us who are in the business, who've been involved or closely following the negotiations, there's nothing new there. Absolutely nothing.?

And that's precisely the problem. At one point in time, it may have been prudent to prevent public disclosures of offers made by either side behind closed doors. Public opinion on both sides had become so entrenched that even the smallest of concessions would face scrutiny

and, most likely, intense criticism. Arab refugees would balk at forfeiting their right of return; Israelis would object to any attempt by the Palestinians to claim East Jerusalem as their capital.

Now, however, these issues are out on the table, discussed regularly in the media and debated vigorously in cafés from Ramallah to Nablus to Tel Aviv. Israelis and Palestinians know the issues; what they don't know — and, some say, what they should know — is what their leaders are offering behind closed doors to achieve a secure and lasting peace.

“I think what it shows is there's a need for a more kind of proactive education campaign from the Palestinian negotiators to their public,” al-Omari said. “Had the [Palestinian Authority] divulged this kind of information more publicly and more proactively in the past, there wouldn't have been anything for Al Jazeera to publish anyways.”

As Blake Hounshell of Foreign Policy noted on Monday, “Palestinian leaders have made no effort to prepare their public for these kinds of concessions.” So when the revelations appeared in print, confirmed by major media organizations, the shock was immediate and intense — even if most Palestinians had already assumed on their own what they were seeing on Al Jazeera.

“It confirms everything people have known,” said Daoud Kuttub, a Palestinian journalist and director of the Institute of Modern Media at Al Quds University in Jerusalem. “It's different when you see it in writing than when it was done behind the scenes.”

There is also, perhaps, a more hopeful takeaway regarding the impact of these revelations on the peace process. As Kuttub noted, the publication of the “Palestine Papers” makes the many offers by Palestinian negotiators somehow more immediate, and challenges the Israeli government to take positions on some of the proposals. In the memos, for example, Israeli leaders are seen acknowledging Palestinian concessions and “pocketing” them, as Kuttub put it, without offering their own concessions or counter-proposals

“It's a challenge to the Israelis in the sense that, Okay, now we have the Palestinian position on the table publicly,” al-Omari added. “Is this government even willing to accept something like this or not??”

Early answers to that question, however, have not been encouraging. Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, the leader of a right-wing political party that supports settlement expansion and plays a central role in the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, told Israeli Radio on Monday that the leaked documents prove a permanent two-state solution is not yet possible, according to the Israeli newspaper Haaretz. Lieberman favors an “interim agreement” that would freeze the existing conditions in place, something the Palestinians have dismissed as unacceptable.

Lieberman's comments shine a light on what ultimately may be the central dilemma raised by the “Palestine Papers” — the inherent asymmetry of the negotiations. Israel occupies the land, and without considerable pressure from an outside source — the international community or the American government — the country's current right-wing leadership is unlikely to cede much ground at all.

That, Kuttab noted, is what explains the apparent desperation on the part of the Palestinians in the leaked memos.

?It's logical. They're the ones who are suffering, and so they are the ones who are in a rush to solve the problem,? Kuttab said. ?The Israelis are not in any rush.?

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