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A New Plan for Mideast?

Media Mention of Ziad Asali in Khaleej Times - May 14, 2009 - 12:00am

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There has been much chatter in recent days that Middle East peacemakers are on the verge of a major breakthrough with some predicting that there may be an announcement when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu comes to Washington on May 18 to meet with President Barack Obama.

Will Obama succeed in twisting Israel and the Palestinians' arms to the point where they can finally agree over the various issues? One of the biggest stumbling blocks in the Arab-Israeli dispute has always been the sheer complexity of the problem. The Middle East dispute is not made up of a single issue, but as the above "mind map" illustrates, the conflict is a compilation of multifaceted issues, all of which must be addressed simultaneously. Failure to do so will simply not yield results because by the time the parties involved get around to discussing the second or third issue, changes on the ground, instigated by "spoilers," will have redistributed the cards, sending everyone back to the starting point. That has been one of the shortfalls of all previous US administrations—Republicans and Democrats alike—who have tried to resolve the 60-year-plus dispute. Usually, one of the reasons was that they tried to solve the problem by breaking it up into separate issues. That will simply not work.

"The Palestinian issue cannot be solved item-by-item," Ziad Asali, President of the American Task Force on Palestine told the Middle East Times.

"It would be foolish to do this piece meal," Philip Wilcox, a former US diplomat who served in the Middle East and who now heads the Foundation for Middle East Peace, also told the Middle East Times.

The difficult task, however, will be in getting all the pieces to fall into place at the same time, several observers agreed. But where to start?

This is where George Mitchell comes in. Mitchell, of course, is President Obama's special Middle East envoy, who likes to "play his cards close to his chest," observed Rashid Khalidi, a Palestinian-American professor at New York's Columbia University. Khalidi, who advised the Palestinian delegation at the 1991 Madrid conference, is traditionally very well informed with the intricacies of the Middle East peace process.

Like Khalidi, a number of other analysts agree that something is going on in the Middle East peace process.

"There is some hope in the air," Ambassador Wilcox told the Middle East Times. Indeed, in recent days there has been a sense of renewed optimism among some analysts that the issues may finally move forward — in unison — and largely as a result of a new idea put forward by the Obama administration, more likely than not by George Mitchell's team. This, however, is far from being a one-man show. Moving the peace process to the point where it is today has involved a cast of thousands.

This new idea, several specialists believe, would be based largely on the Arab peace initiative, a comprehensive plan to settle the Middle East dispute first introduced at an Arab League meeting in Beirut in 2002.

The initiative originated as an idea first floated by former King Fahd of Saudi Arabia. It offers Israel recognition by all 23 members of the Arab League (22 states plus Palestine) in exchange for Israel's withdrawal to pre-1967 borders. Of late there has been talk of revisiting the Arab peace agreement, something Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would like to see so as not to appear to accept it lock, stock and barrel, believes Noam Shelef of Americans for Peace Now.

And despite the fact that many see Netanyahu as a super conservative, it is worth reminding in the past it was always the Likud that returned (Sinai), yielded (Gaza), and that may just finalise the peace with the Palestinians.

“Netanyahu is going to surprise us all,” Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, a Labour minister, the Israeli daily news-? paper Haaretz.

“He understands that there is a new administration in the United States, which is neither of the Clinton administration nor the Bush administration, and that if we don't come up with a peace plan, someone else will call the shots for us,” said Ben-Eliezer.

There remains, however, one more hurdle to jump and which make the rest of the issues discussed so far, appear weak by comparison: and that is the issue of inter-Palestinian reconciliation, bringing Fatah and Hamas together. Ironically, in the end it may turn out to be that the final stumbling block holding up the creation of a Palestinian state, a dream the Palestinians have aspired for so much, fought so hard to achieve and shed so much blood for, both their own and that of others, may well be the Palestinians themselves. Unless they can place their differences behind them, they risk prolonging the conflict for another 60 years.

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Claude Salhani (View from Washington)

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