

A NEW OPPORTUNITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Now that the Palestinians and Israelis have gone through their respective process of free and fair elections in 2006, a new political terrain has emerged in the Middle East that must be regarded as an opportunity to address the long conflict between them in a new light.

The election of Hamas in January by the Palestinians has been largely met with a sense of skepticism by the international community when it comes to the possibility of advancing the issue of peace between Israel and the Palestinians. The selection of Hamas's prime minister designate, Ismail Haniyeh, now places the responsibility of governing on the Hamas political party and it is hoped that this new role will also include a preparedness by Hamas to commence a process of intense interaction with Israel and the international community in a quest for a permanent settlement to the Middle East conflict.

Of course, any progress in this area will require a commitment from Hamas to recognize and abide by interim peace deals between Israel and the Palestinian Authority and to abandoning any campaigns of violence against Israel. But the international community should seek to play a direct role to try and influence such an outcome and not simply repeat ad nauseam its conditions to start engaging with Hamas.

The election of Ehud Olmert as prime minister of the new Kadima political party in Israel also now clears the air for a renewed approach to kick start Israeli-Palestinians talks that aim at building upon previous steps in this direction. Olmert's honeymoon period will be very short after failing to secure a very convincing victory with less than thirty seats in the Knesset. He has however been given a mandate to proceed with securing Israel's borders by evacuating many of the Jewish settlements in the West Bank either on a unilateral basis or as a result of talks with the Palestinians. The latter is the course where diplomatic initiative now needs to focus before this window of opportunity disappears.

With regards the role that the international community should play at this critical stage in Middle East politics a number of factors should be considered. First, the international consensus that has been achieved through the Quartet Road Map initiative since 2003 must be maintained. There is no better alternative to having the United States, the European Union, the United Nations and Russia sing from the same hymn sheet when it comes to advancing the prospects for peace in the Middle East.

Second, while it is obvious that the Road Map initiative is in complete shambles, if not also obsolete as originally framed, it is also true that some progress has been registered when it comes to some of the issues that the Road Map peace plan originally highlighted as crucial steps to improving the context within which peace negotiations could follow. The Palestinians have held free and fair elections and the cease-fire of the terror and violence campaign of suicide bombings has been maintained, two of the main points highlighted in the Road Map. What has so far been lacking is a focus by the sponsors of the Road Map on the immense economic and political dividends that are referred to in the

same peace plan if the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships are prepared to return to the negotiating table in an effort to identify areas where compromise can be sought.

Referring to the Road Map commitment of holding an international conference to address the issue of supporting Palestinian economic hardships and formally setting the stage for launching the process that will lead to the creation of a Palestinian state are the types of actions the international community should also be highlighting now that the winds of political change have blown across the Middle East.

In the final analysis, it is up to the Israelis and Palestinians to demonstrate that they are prepared search for common ground when it comes to the long list of sensitive issues that includes final status talks on borders, refugees, settlements and the status of Jerusalem. But the international community led by the Quartet must also try and influence positively the new political landscape that has emerged in 2006 in the Middle East. The very fact that the majority of Palestinians and Israelis participated in the democratic process of elections is a clear indicator of their desire to find a way out of the cyclical process of violence that has dominated Israeli-Palestinian relations for decades. It is an opportunity that must not be missed!

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