

## **MOMENT OF TRUTH**

After more than a six-year lull in peace overtures in the Middle East, the possible beginning of a different chapter in regional relations is emerging that could lead to a more stable pattern of relations being established between Israel and the Arab world. This will only happen if regional protagonists and the international community are prepared to stand up and be counted in this delicate moment of truth that will determine future Middle East relations.

If international brokers of peace are serious about ushering in a more positive episode in Middle East relations they must secure a clear guarantee from the new Palestinian Unity Government that they renounce violence, recognise Israel's right to exist and adhere to previous agreements and obligations. Ambiguity that exists in any of these areas must be eliminated if champions of peace are going to stand a serious chance of securing a peaceful settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian through a process of compromise.

The diplomatic whirlwind of activity that is seeking to kick-start momentum towards peace in the Middle East requires all actors with influence in the region to act in synchronicity with one another. The Quartet, the Arab League, the United Nations, Israel, the Palestinian Authority must invest all their political capital in moving forward a dialogue of diplomacy that aims at a permanent settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The return of American shuttle diplomacy in the region is a very important first step that must be applauded. American Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has pledged to invest on an on-going basis political capital to nurture closer Israeli-Palestinian relations. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas have in fact already agreed to meet on a regular biweekly basis to discuss immediate concerns and focus on the long-term perspective of their relationship.

The Arab League summit in Saudi Arabia also added momentum to the search for peace in the Middle East by endorsing the 2002 Arab peace initiative. The Arab peace plan offers Israel full diplomatic relations if it fully withdraws from land occupied in 1967 and accepts the inclusion of Arab East Jerusalem in a Palestinian state and a just solution to the problem of Palestinian refugees who fled their homes in 1948.

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, has also pledged his support of the Arab peace initiative as it presents both Israelis and the Palestinians with a platform upon which a process of diplomacy that seeks the cessation of hostilities can commence. The European Union must also add its political and economic weight at this critical juncture in Middle East relations if it is serious about creating a Mediterranean neighbourhood of peace and stability as enshrined in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Declaration of November 1995.

The re-launch of a Middle East peace process is certain to be a long-term process as Israel and the Palestinians gradually seek to foster trust and build confidence in a relationship based on coexistence. But final status objectives that lead to the establishment of a viable Palestinian state and a secure Israeli state must be the focus throughout this process of diplomacy if a permanent peace is to be achieved. Otherwise the Middle East will continue to go down the slippery path of becoming an axis of instability in the post Cold War world.

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