

BACK ON THE PEACE TRACK

Annapolis – major positive development – more than 50 countries and international institutions participated in the first international conference of its kind to focus on the Israeli-Palestinian in more than seven years.

Madrid 1991, Camp David 2000, Road Map in 2003, many pundits comparing latest round of peace initiative to previous failed attempts. But it is clear that this time around there is a major difference when it comes to the geopolitical context within which the current peace initiative is taking place. Middle East has been through a decade of endless strife and suffering – Iraq war that has helped enhance Iran's position in the region, Lebanese war with the rise of Hezbollah, Israeli-Palestinian open conflict with the rise of Hamas

Of course not a foregone conclusion that the post Annapolis peace drive will deliver a permanent settlement to the six decades of conflict between Israel and Palestine. Much will depend on the political will that the leaders concerned are ready to invest in the compromises that will have to be made – will really boil down to the Israelis and Palestinians desire for peace having experienced first hand the alternative lifestyle of suffering and fear. Outcome of the current round of peace negotiations will determine whether the moderates in the Middle East will be able to counter the rise of extremist movements that has taken place especially since the American invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

The contours of any comprehensive and sustainable peace settlement will emerge during 2008 if the following issues are agreed upon:

- First, two states for two people: two democratic states Israel and Palestine side by side as stipulated by UN Resolutions 242 and 338.
- Second, Palestinian state on most of West Bank and all of Gaza.
- Third, 1967 boundaries in West Bank with only three concentrated settlements of Israeli settlers.
- Fourth, Palestinian refugees right of return to Palestinian state plus compensation.
- Fifth, Jerusalem to serve as one capital for two states, a united city with Arab east Jerusalem as the Palestinian capital.
- Sixth, Demilitarise borders between two states
- Seventh, comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict including resolution of the Golan Heights issue with Syria and recognition of Israel.

Role of the international community will also be a decisive factor – the United States must be prepared to invest all of its political and economic resources to continuously supporting the Israelis and Palestinians. George W. Bush has a chance to significantly shift the legacy he will leave behind when it comes to the Middle East if he can deliver on the commitment of a Palestinian state. Essential that his Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice adopts a Henry Kissinger style of shuttle diplomacy in 2008 in the Middle East to serve as facilitator when sensitive negotiations risk derailing peace talks.

Tony Blair's role as fundraiser and political facilitator of the Quartet already seems to be delivering positive results. Must be complemented by the appointment of a high profile EU envoy to also support Israel and Palestine through the difficult negotiations that are certain to follow in 2008. Having created the opportunity for peace talks to again commence all stakeholders with an interest in stability in the Middle East must stand up and be counted – in addition to the EU other actors include the League of Arab States that must seek to influence peace talks as envisaged in the 2002 Beirut Arab League peace plan and also NATO, that has been considering for a long time the possibility of playing a peace keeper type of role in the initial stages of a post settlement situation.

If a permanent settlement is to stand any chance of surviving it will require an iron clad international community insurance policy so that forces against stability reigning across the Middle East are not allowed to hijack such an outcome. Having found a path back to the peace track all efforts must now concentrate on helping navigate a successful way forward.

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