



Back to the Future Again

By Roberta Fahn Schoffman

Roberta Fahn Schoffman, representing IPF in Israel, heads Mindset Media and Strategic Consulting.

There's no denying that the level of diplomatic activity surrounding the Arab-Israel conflict has increased since President Bush, in a speech on July 16th, called for a Middle East peace conference this fall. This week alone, Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayad met with Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni; Tony Blair made his inaugural visit on behalf of the Quartet; Speaker of the Knesset Dalia Itzik traveled to Amman to meet Foreign Minister al-Khatib and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen). The foreign ministers of Jordan and Egypt will come to Israel tomorrow to discuss the Arab peace initiative; and, King Abdullah is in Washington today to meet the President. That's a lot of activity on an issue that just weeks ago seemed to be in a state of diplomatic deep freeze.

Everyone here is hoping this stepped-up political activity can lead to meaningful negotiations and a genuine breakthrough. But the atmosphere is thick with *déjà vu*. With so many recycled players in the current Mideast lineup, the real question is whether new ideas or fresh strategies can actually emerge. Former Prime Minister Blair becomes the special envoy of the Quartet. Former Prime Minister Barak resurfaces as Minister of Defense. Former Finance Minister Fayad is now Palestinian Prime Minister. Former Prime Minister (and recent Vice Prime Minister) Peres is now President of Israel. Even the international summit proposed by George Bush to promote the two-state solution feels like a retread of Madrid in 1991, which was the last time a president named Bush called for an international peace conference where Israel was seated alongside its Arab neighbors. Still, if this last-ditch Bush effort to shift gears in the Middle East is able to breathe new energy into the moribund peace negotiations, it will be a genuine (if limited) comeback, welcomed by many.

The key, this time around, is to have a realistic and achievable plan that will take into account the needs of all parties. With less than 18 months left to leave an historic mark on his presidency, Bush's international summit is meant, in part, to deflect discussion away from Iraq by placing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in center court. As the President took a hard look at American engagement in the region, only this conflict, oddly enough, seemed to have even a glimmer of hope for progress. With optimism not in large supply on this side of the ocean, a glimmer is enough to rally interest in the American initiative, in spite of the skeptics who will claim too little, too late. Tony Blair, who is keeping mostly quiet on his first visit as Quartet envoy, did admit that "there is a sense of possibility" in the air. But, as he reportedly told Israeli officials, the conference must have both content and substance; it cannot be a mere photo opportunity.

Many disparate parts are now in place and the trick is to get them all moving -- in the same direction, at the same time. After years of claiming there is no partner on the Palestinian side, there is now a sense among Israelis that there may never be better Palestinian partners than Abu Mazen and Fayad. The latter's western education, and his determination to bring order to the Palestinian economy -- and to provide transparent accounting of funds from donor countries, the US Congress, and tax money previously withheld by Israel -- are duly appreciated. Moreover, Israelis are impressed with Fayad's aim of disarming the militias, as stated in his July 17th Ha'aretz interview with Akiva Eldar: "There will be no tolerance towards weapons outside the Palestinian Authority and its institutions." He has even hinted that the 178 fugitives who received amnesty from Israeli authorities will be integrated into the Palestinian security services.

With Hamas basically stuck behind walls of its own making, both Abu Mazen and Fayad are complying, for now, with Prime Minister Olmert's demand that they not work with the elected Hamas government led by Ismail Haniyeh. This is not a popular position in Palestinian quarters, as a recent FAVO Foundation poll, funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, shows: 85% of Palestinians would like to see negotiations leading to national reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah. That may explain why Fayad continues to declare, contrary to Olmert's wishes, that he is not abandoning Gaza. In an interview on July 18th with Nahum Barnea and Roni Shaked of Yediot Aharonot, Fayad said he cannot turn his back on Gaza. "Our goal is to reverse the violent coup, the putsch, staged by Hamas. We reached the conclusion that there is no choice but to treat Gaza as a mother treats an infant. We must look after it. On the other hand, we must not legitimize the Hamas government there."

President Bush and Secretary Rice are finally of one mind that time has all but run out for this conflict. After years of avoiding direct involvement, Bush is hoping the upcoming peace conference will demonstrate both heightened

US engagement in the process and presidential backing for Rice who will chair it on behalf of the US. Blair, also looking to revise his historical image, is expected to try and push his role beyond its current economic and governance mandate into mediating political negotiations as well. The British Consulate in Jerusalem is preparing for long and frequent stays of the former prime minister.

Olmert found his own reasons to embrace the international conference. The news that the final Winograd report (the Winograd committee was charged with examining the performance of the government and IDF in the Second Lebanon War) will likely be postponed for several months in order to give those blamed the opportunity to review the findings and prepare a defense gives Olmert and his coalition breathing space. Some observers have even suggested that Bush's call for the autumn summit helped encourage the Winograd committee to decide on the delay. The Prime Minister, members of the Winograd committee understood, cannot be expected to contend with the report's findings while engaged in a major conference convened by the President of the United States.

Foreign Minister Livni, who is considered to be extremely close to Secretary Rice, views the peace conference favorably and supports the need to strengthen moderate voices in the region. Shimon Peres, newly inaugurated as Israel's ninth president, did not attempt to conceal his personal opinions during his first presidential interview. Calling on Israel to "get rid of the territories," Peres told AP on July 17th that while he has changed his government post, "I didn't change my beliefs."

The last piece of the diplomatic configuration, the Arab League, is trying to keep the process alive through its Arab Initiative, first floated in 2002, which promises full Arab recognition of Israel in exchange for territory occupied in 1967. This week in Jerusalem, the foreign ministers of Egypt and Jordan are expected to promote the Arab plan as the appropriate framework for the Bush summit.

For this Bush conference to succeed, old formulas have to change. The Arab participants will have to include countries that do not already have relations with Israel, in particular Saudi Arabia. Abu Mazen and Salam Fayad will have to find a way to represent all Palestinian people without giving Hamas the power to veto decisions. Israel will need to implement, and not just articulate, a clear policy to ease conditions for Palestinians. The 255 prisoners released on Friday and delivered to Abu Mazen's Mukataa was a start. But old promises to dismantle illegal settlements, stop settlement expansion, and close checkpoints cannot continue to be ignored. If Secretary Rice has her way, Israel will have to go beyond visible gestures, and finally outline a political horizon for Palestinian statehood upon which Abu Mazen and Fayad can hang the hopes of their people.

This past Saturday night, at the Tomb of the Kings on Salahadin Street in East Jerusalem, the "Jerusalem Festival" was in full swing. The unique venue for this annual Palestinian celebration was spectacular. The full house of Palestinians, Israelis and foreigners (many from the NGO and diplomatic corps) swayed and clapped to the contagious beat of Lady Smith Black Mombazo. The group, most famous for backing up Paul Simon in his "Graceland" album, combined Zulu moves with Motown synchronization and sang of love and of respect for village elders, and also songs of congratulations to South Africa for rising out of its harsh struggle. To the mixed Jerusalem audience, they repeated a simple message: "People need to come together to solve their problems." In that special atmosphere, detached from the reality of this divided city and inspired by the passion of eight South African singers, it was possible to think that the Bush conclave can possibly do that – bring people together with the glimmer of hope that maybe our problems can also be solved.
