

SUSTAINABLE PEACE FEASIBLE IN MIDDLE EAST

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Despite obstacles, President Barack Obama's visit to Israel last month offers real hope for a resuscitated and ultimately successful peace negotiation in the Middle East.

There has already been a return to normal relations between Turkey and Israel, thanks to effective diplomacy by prime ministers Erdogan of Turkey and Netanyahu of Israel, urged on by Obama. The best reason for optimism about the wider region is that most affected peoples would benefit strongly from a sustainable peace, including victims of increasing lawlessness in Sinai.

Realism is still needed more than ever, however, and first among the ongoing would-be spoilers of any peace agreement are Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran, and several aspects of Israel itself.

Hamas

When Israel pulled out of the Gaza Strip in 2005, Hamas created bases there from which thousands of missiles and rockets have been fired at Israelis. Branded a terrorist organization by the European Union, U.S. and Israel, the Hamas web site remains full of anti-Semitism, even calling for the killing of Jews. Its terror is also directed against Gaza residents of good will who oppose its views, which results in leaving the anti-Semitism of Hamas effectively unopposed. The Palestinian Authority should thus ban it. Those who can exercise freedom of expression elsewhere should also oppose Hamas anti-Semitism.

The schoolbooks in Gaza and the West Bank are where the venom takes deepest root. Israel should ensure that its own are not becoming anti-Arab and Islamophobic.

Hamas claims that its short-term goal is to drive Israeli forces from the occupied territories. It has attacked both settlers and soldiers in the territories and in Israel itself. The offer by Hamas to Israel in 2006 of a ten-year truce was conditioned on a complete Israeli withdrawal from all territories it seized in the 1967 war. Nor has it dropped its demand that Palestinian refugees from 1948 be allowed to return to their homes in what has become Israel, regardless of whether doing so would end Israel's existence as a Jewish state.

Hezbollah and Iran

Hezbollah is probably an even more effective enemy of regional peace than Hamas because it was founded as a surrogate of the mullahs in Iran. It also forms a lead part of the Government of Lebanon. Hezbollah has been actively involved in terrorist attacks against Jews world wide, including the bombing of the Jewish community Centre in Buenos Aires in 1994 which killed 85 and wounded 151. In

mid-2012, a Hezbollah suicide bomber attacked a bus full of Israeli tourists in Bulgaria, killing five and the bus driver and injuring two others.

Assad's tormented Syria is of course a client state of Iran, as is increasingly the government of al-Malaki in Iraq. If both fall, Tehran will be weakened and with it both Hezbollah and Hamas at least to some extent.

Dislodging the mullahs from the Government of Iran or Hezbollah from the Government of Lebanon democratically is difficult because both maintain office by force. The Government of Lebanon is democratically elected in theory, but if Hezbollah did not have weapons, it would be unable to maintain its current role in Beirut.

If the international community can reduce the appeal of anti-Semitism from the mullahs of Iran and of their agent, Hezbollah, their hold on power in the two states will be weakened. If we Canadians want to do something to achieve peace, combating anti-Semitism, which in many forms is a criminal offence in our country, is an excellent place to start.

Israel

Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, recently elected for a third term, has formed a new coalition with Jewish Home, a far-right party supported by settlers, whose leader opposes a Palestinian state, thus creating pressure on Netanyahu not to revive negotiations under Obama's stewardship. Many observers note that Netanyahu himself appears ambivalent if not opposed to a two-state solution; there are also elements within Netanyahu's own Likud party that oppose a Palestinian state. Fortunately, they are balanced by parties like Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid party, Tzipi Livni's new Hatunah party and Kadima, which are all advocates of the two-state solution.

The growing Israeli settlements have prompted a global outcry and are the major obstacle to bringing the more moderate Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, in the West Bank back to the negotiating table. He demands a freeze on settlements and is correct also from a sustainable peace standpoint.

In my view, the best route to a successful negotiation lies in the reality that opinion surveys indicate that approximately three-quarters of both Israelis and Palestinians today want a two-state solution. That truth must drive the upcoming talks. Anyone in Hezbollah, Iran or Hamas, or Israel who attempts any other solution must be side-lined in favour of this unified public wish on both sides.

Even Hamas, which wants a very different outcome, knows it must be seen to 'get with the program' or lose support to those who want a two-state solution. On the Israeli side, Netanyahu must be persuaded to break with his coalition partner if an opportunity arises to make progress towards this greater goal.

In short, all of us who dream of sustainable peace in the Middle East should urge our own MPs to have Canada apply its influence with all parties for this attainable solution.