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The Middle East Peace Talks: Bracing for the Challenge of Militancy

Shiran Ali

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The recent Middle East peace conference at Annapolis in the United States did not involve Iran. The lack of results from the latest peace initiative and Iran's exclusion from the peace talks may lead to the rise of militancy in the Middle East.

ON 27 November 2007, a fresh round of discussions between the Palestinian Authority and Israel was initiated at Annapolis amid much skepticism. As with previous failed rounds of peace talks, the expectations of the Israeli and Palestinian peoples would have a powerful impact on the success of these diplomatic meetings.

Even if the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships are committed to the results, their populations may have difficulty stomaching the final settlement, leading to a scuttling of the outcome. Any perceived failure of the talks will weaken the positions of both Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert and Palestine Authority president Mahmoud Abbas. Unhappiness on the part of the Palestinian people will feed the cause of militancy, and strengthen the hands of Iran which has been highly skeptical of the talks.

Exclusion of Iran

The exclusion of Iran comes as no surprise as the tensions between Washington and Tehran over the latter's nuclear ambitions spill-over into other issues. While Iran's exclusion highlights Washington's blatant disregard for the reality on the ground in the Middle East, it is clearly also an attempt to symbolically signal that Iran is not a regional power with whom there is no need to negotiate. Iran's exclusion also raises tensions in the relations with its allies most notably Syria, which was invited. But more importantly, it raises the question whether overall peace can actually be attained without Iran's involvement. Iran's deliberate exclusion will only fuel Tehran's desire to see a breakdown of the US-initiated peace process and provide the impetus for Tehran to undermine it at every opportunity.

Iran's strategic partner, Hamas, seized control of Gaza in June 2007 but is not recognised by the West as a legitimate political entity. Nevertheless, the group poses a formidable challenge to the peace process. This is magnified by the alliance between Hamas and Iran which will be enhanced as a result of Tehran's exclusion from the conference in Washington and the apparent lack of progress in the peace talks.

The Challenge of Militancy

Iran's alienation enhances its prospect as a powerful ally of other militant groups such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad who are also opposed to Abbas's negotiations with the Israeli leadership. Tehran has already announced that it is planning to host a meeting of Palestinian militant factions with the aim of countering the US-led Middle East peace conference. Combined with Syria's ambivalent role in the summit, the militant factions may be emboldened to go all out to disrupt the US-initiated peace process. Together with the increasing dissatisfaction with the Abbas leadership, whom many Palestinian see as a 'traitor' and not representing the entire Palestinian population, militancy may escalate in 2008.

To manage this challenge, Iran must be given a stake in the peace process. In addition, despite its fatigue from the Iraq quagmire, Washington has to remain engaged in the Middle East by sustaining the peace process that it initiated until a final settlement is reached.

Reducing the Militancy Challenge

Despite the growing challenge from militancy which the failure of peace in the region has helped to spawn, the Middle East peace initiative by Washington is not a lost cause. The peace conference can lay the foundation for long term success if serious heed is paid to the underlying causes of the militancy. An increase in militancy may not be an indication that all is lost. Militancy may likely increase if the peace process develops in a positive direction, precisely because a final deal seems close. If there is a final settlement, albeit an imperfect one, it is the militants' cause that will be lost.

It is unrealistic, and potentially harmful, to expect politically-weakened leaders to resolve in one year complex and difficult issues which have been at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for decades. The idea of a deadline though, is important as it will force all parties to stay focused and try to deliver results. But the danger is that a deal will be seen as rushed, which in turn will suffer from a lack of legitimacy. The ambitious deadline of end 2008 for a settlement will not only serve to raise the pressure on the leaders involved in rushing into a settlement. This will give Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and perhaps Hezbollah, the power to jeopardise the process through militant actions.

A soft-handed approach, complemented by the astute use of diplomatic language, is essential to maintain the process but is not sufficient. Both sides have to recognise and respond appropriately, with the help of the US, to the militants' challenge. In order to succeed in achieving peace and effectively tackle militancy, the leaders of both Israel and the Palestinian Authority have to bridge the dichotomy that exists between them.

The probability of achieving success in the negotiation process would be higher should Iran be engaged, whether directly or indirectly, at some later stage. Despite all the peaceful negotiation efforts, the threat of militancy will inevitably rise in the coming year should the peace talks show no movement, or break down completely. Thus, for the negotiations to bear fruit in the future, leaders who are committed to utopian goals of building roads to peace must not underestimate this looming shadow of militancy that comes with it.

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