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"It's Not a Peace Process"

by Kenneth W. Stein

The recent freeze and thaw in Syrian-Israeli negotiations, the tit-for-tat attacks and casualties on the Lebanese-Israeli border, and the breakdown and restart in the Palestinian-Israeli final status talks contain the same broad lesson: This is not a peace process.

Lower the bar; the lion and lamb are not about to sleep peacefully in the same Middle Eastern meadow.

The Arab-Israeli conflict is becoming a series of Arab-Israeli relationships. Arab states and the Palestinians are accepting Israel out of selfish national interests, not from a love of Zion, for idol worship of Herzl, or after an epiphany demanding an embrace in Jewish nationalism. For some, but not all Arab intellectuals, writers, political leaders, and others, Israel still remains at best a stranger in their midst.

We should stop calling it a peace process because in doing so, we artificially inflate expectations of what the future should provide.

Negotiating From Need

Egypt started overt negotiations with Israel more than a quarter-century ago because it was a matter of national convenience, not a commitment to a conviction; Sadat wanted Sinai returned. Jordan and the PLO negotiated with Israel to uphold or gain territorial integrity. Now, the Syrians and Lebanese are at the brink of replicating the objective: make agreements with Israel because you want control of your national territory.

You negotiate with Israel because you need to do so, not because you want to do so.

Rather than developing friendly state-to-state relationships, like the U.S. values with Canada, Belgium enjoys with Holland, or Kansas has with Nebraska, Israeli leaders are dancing a distant minuet with their Arab neighbors rather than an embracing waltz.

Israelis are headed for physical separation from the Palestinians with only economic and political contact when necessary. There are no

accepting bear hugs in these Palestinian-Israeli embraces, just security collaboration under American scrutiny when overlapping national interests are served.

Look at how Egypt has sustained a 'cold peace' with Israel. Sadat flew to Jerusalem in 1977 and broke the psychological barrier of Arab non-recognition of Israel, but recognizing Israel as a reality then and accepting Israel in the Middle East now remain distinctly separate issues.

For two decades, Egypt developed an art form of doing the minimal in implementing normal relations with Israel. In the March 1, 2000, issue of the prestigious Egyptian weekly Al Ahram, Egyptian politicians of the left, center, and right concurred in interviews that even after an Israeli withdrawal from territories, the historic struggle with Israel (a euphemism for Israel's very existence) will continue.

These were the same words uttered last January, after the current Syrian-Israeli negotiations went into a deep freeze. Said Lebanese Prime Minister Salim al-Huss, "We are determined not to relinquish an iota of Lebanon's rights in the settlement process... Even if the political settlement is good enough to be called peace, peace will not mean the end of the historical struggle."

In other words, peace with Israel remains an interim physical stage because of the imbalance between strategic Arab weakness and Israeli strategic strength. Put differently, making an agreement with Israel is a contractual understanding, not yet a transformed collective mental state.

Facing Reality

Arab states have recognized and negotiated with Israel because two realities persist: their other options in dealing with Israel have evaporated and their collective strength is weaker than Israel's.

Vis-a-vis the former, large sums of oil money have dissipated, a conventional Arab military option to threaten Israel's existence no longer exists, and no great power patron is available to provide political, financial, or military assistance. On the latter, Arab unity between states is at best paper-thin. Arab economies are sagging and their currencies are relatively weak, domestic infrastructure needs cry for immediate attention and cures, under-employment and unemployment abound in staggering proportions, Arab populations are burgeoning below the age of 25, Israel's GDP of \$100 billion is just about equal to the GDP of all Israel's contiguous Arab neighbors combined, and globalization is out-pacing the capacity of Arab states to keep up with or come close to

Israel's ride on its quest.

Like an Orthodox Jewish dance, because it is in their respective national interests, both sides will occasionally touch the opposite ends of the negotiating handkerchief when it is held by the United States. Only furtively do their hands touch; a public embrace or handshake is rare and usually off the record. Washington provides the manpower to prevent a major confrontation and regularly provides new batches of glue to keep yesterday's agreement from unraveling and new sets of handcuffs to keep negotiating occupants in close but certainly not loving proximity.

And because this is a negotiating process and not a peace process, the questions of trust abound.

Can Assad, Arafat, or their respective successor be trusted to keep an agreement? Will a future Israeli government of different political inclination implement or freeze a previous understanding, or one not yet negotiated?

Let's be realists. For decades to come, the present state of imprecise Arab-Israeli negotiations, with its diverging interests, uncertainty, and continued periodic loss of life, may be as good as it gets. Lower the bar of expectations.