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Dec 19, 2007

NEW ROUND OF PEACE TALKS

Militancy threatens Mid-East peace process

By Shiran Ali

LAST month saw a fresh round of discussions between the Palestinian Authority and Israel at Annapolis in the United States amid much scepticism. As with previous failed rounds of talks, the expectations of the Israeli and Palestinian peoples would have a powerful impact on the success of this latest session.

Even if the Israeli and Palestinian leaders are committed to the results, their populations may have difficulty stomaching the final settlement, leading to another failure.

Even a perceived failure will weaken the positions of both Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestine Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. Unhappiness on the part of the Palestinians will feed the cause of militancy and strengthen the hand of Iran.

The exclusion of Iran from the talks comes as no surprise as tensions between Washington and Teheran over the latter's nuclear ambitions spill over into other issues. While Teheran's exclusion highlights Washington's 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, thus there is no need to negotiate with it.

The exclusion also raises tensions in Iran's relations with its allies, most notably Syria, which was invited to the talks. But more importantly, it raises the question of whether overall peace can actually be attained without Iran's involvement.

This deliberate exclusion will only fuel Iran's desire to see a breakdown of the US-initiated peace process and provide the impetus for Teheran to undermine it at every opportunity.

Iran's strategic partner, Hamas, seized control of Gaza in June but is not recognised by the West. 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 Teheran's exclusion from the conference in Annapolis and the apparent lack of progress in the peace talks.

Iran's alienation also enhances its prospect as a powerful ally of other groups. Teheran 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 at the summit, the militant factions may be emboldened to disrupt the peace process. Together with the increasing dissatisfaction with the Abbas leadership, militancy may escalate next year.

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.

Despite the growing challenge from militancy, the Middle East peace initiative 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 if there is a final settlement, even 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 that have been at the heart of the conflict for decades.

The idea of a deadline though, is important as it will force all parties to stay focused. 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 the end of 2008 for a settlement will not only raise the pressure on the leaders, but also might prompt militants to try to jeopardise the process.

A soft-handed approach, complemented by the astute use of diplomatic language, is essential to maintaining the process. But it 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 bringing about peace and effectively tackling 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 negotiations would be higher if Iran were 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 progress, or break down completely.

For negotiations to bear fruit, leaders committed to the goal of building roads to peace must not underestimate this looming shadow of militancy that comes with it.

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