



October 2007

THE SUMMIT: MIRAGE OR MILESTONE?

**Dr. Sherifa Zuhur
Strategic Studies Institute**

Considering Senator George Mitchell's remarks on the negotiations that ended the conflict in Northern Ireland, I can only wonder if they would have succeeded if matters were left to fester as in the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Or in the national dispute in Lebanon. Or Iraq. Without the energy devoted by a U.S. President, the 2 years devoted to negotiations on Northern Ireland, and the leaders' refusal to be dissuaded by violence, could Mitchell have succeeded? Had he and others not been deeply committed to the notion that the people of Northern Ireland should choose their own future, would they have prevailed?

It is high time that sustained energy of this type be devoted to the conflicts mentioned above. The Palestinian-Arab-Israeli conflict, in particular, requires a more dedicated and sustained approach than given to date. Israeli-Palestinian negotiation is a must. It will not negate the need for a comprehensive regional agreement on this issue, on the basis of then Crown-Prince Abdullah's offer in Beirut in 2002—a two-state solution and Israeli withdrawal to 1967 borders in exchange for peace. This peace will benefit Israel and the United States, not only Palestinians and other Arabs, and will permit true regional cooperation on the unhappy situation in Iraq and other pressing matters in the region.

The view in the West Bank and Gaza about the prospects for peace was dim this summer and early autumn. In part, this is due to former Prime Minister Tony Blair's decision to forgo meeting with Hamas, or with the elected officials who might represent them, and his insistence that Hamas must "recognize Israel." Certain Hamas officials continue to respond that they are in de facto recognition of Israel, but that words cannot be put into their mouths that betray the sentiments of their constituents. Pessimism also emerges because Israelis are willing only to discuss "principles of agreement," as if the Oslo Accords had never taken place, whereas the Palestinians want to cover all specific and salient issues, and will not regard a ceremonial meeting of photo-ops as a signal of a new era.

It has not helped that the United States and Israel essentially ignored, or supported a dissolution of the Mecca Accords by encouraging Mahmoud Abbas to extralegally dismiss the Fatah-Hamas government in response to Hamas' takeover in Gaza and to form a new nonelected government, rescinding all of the ministry appointments and firing all of the Hamas employees. Others would argue that it was Hamas that acted precipitously in seizing Gaza, but the role of certain individuals like Muhammad Dahlan has yet to be discussed in the Western press. Others would say that the essential tension between the "Tunis returnees" of Fatah and the leadership from within the Territories had also added to the lawless period prior to Hamas' electoral success. Or that the continuing desperation along with transformation in Palestinian society that has produced support for Hamas as an antidote to Fatah necessarily engendered factionalism.

Hamas has refrained from action in the West Bank, although its supporters, especially in the larger cities, are far stronger than Abbas's. The fiction that the West Bank is controlled by Abbas's new nonelected government is just that. Another fiction is the comparison of Hamas with al-Qa'ida. Hamas does not call for an extreme version of Islam. Instead of *takfir*, its policy is to recognize anyone who calls himself a Muslim, as a Muslim. A Christian deputy and Christian cabinet member in Gaza were part of Hamas' government, and Christians and women—even without hijab—are not under threat now in Gaza. In fact, the Executive Forces of Hamas have instituted an emergency number, 109, for reporting of domestic abuse as well as crimes or family feuds. The attacks on internet cafes, music, and merchants that were carried out in Gaza prior to Hamas' takeover have now ceased as Hamas reestablished control. One problem was the Islamic Swords of Justice, which is more similar to al-Qa'ida, and Hamas has suppressed this group. Hamas fighters and Haniyah's security personnel also contained another al-Qa'ida-like group, the Army of Islam, and forced them to release British journalist hostage Allan Johnston.

Hamas spokesmen have asked why they are charged with terrorism and acts they do not conduct, and opined that whereas Iraqis would gain their sovereignty in a matter of years, the Palestinians have not and fear for the future. "When we use the language of negotiation, the Israelis say we are weak and grant nothing," said former deputy prime minister and minister of education Naser al-Din Shaer, "Should we use the language of jihad, or the language of negotiation?" And Shaykh Hatem Qafishah, Palestinian Legislative Council member from Nablus, explained that the debate about the proper path for Palestinians to liberate themselves from Israeli oppression had been taking place at all levels of society, as indeed, Hamas, which had rejected Oslo, has undergone an evolution similar to the Palestinian movement as a whole, acknowledging a two-state solution, working against corruption and old-style authoritarianism, and though winning a fair election, then experiencing boycott and a limiting of options.

Meanwhile some writers in the Israeli media call for a military takeover of Gaza and its border with Egypt and establishment of a buffer zone there, while some type of arrangement will be made with Abbas in the West Bank. But there is no discussion of a

state, nor the status of Jerusalem, and certainly not of the Palestinian refugees scattered through the region. Caroline Glick recently contested the Israeli military doctrine of stand-off battles utilizing precision weaponry in asymmetric warfare in the *Jerusalem Post*, as presented by Yedidia Groll-Yaari and Haim Assa in their book, *Diffused Warfare: The Concept of Virtual Mass*. Assa and Groll-Yaari's ideas are not dissimilar to certain thoughts proffered by our former colleague, Steve Biddle. Glick instead argues for "systemic shock" and territorial control. She holds that the new way of war has not worked in Gaza or in Lebanon in 2006. To Glick, the reasons for the asymmetric conflict in Gaza and the West Bank or for the Qassam rockets fired into the city of Sderot are of no consequence, only pacification is. The reason is the popular response to a lengthy military occupation—of 40 years (1967) or almost 60 years (1948) — and the absence of civil and human rights under the military laws of an alien government. Instead of "shock and awe" (which succeeded in the immediate term and failed in the longer-term in the West Bank in 2002), instead of territorial reassumption, instead of constant cuts of electricity and supplies and curfews and rules against Palestinians working in Israel, it is time to use a different instrument of power—diplomacy.

The withdrawal of Gaza angered many Israelis who feared it would serve as a means for future dismantlement of the far more numerous settlements in the West Bank. Neutralizing that withdrawal appears to be ever so important today.

Neither meeting with only selected Palestinians, nor excluding Gaza, nor destroying the ground needed for negotiation by employing massive force will achieve peace in this round. Just as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced that "we cannot simply continue to say we want a two-state solution, we have got to start to move towards one," electricity and goods to Gaza were cut off, and the food shortages hit the million residents of Gaza during Ramadan. Half of those residents are children.

Columnist Jihad el-Khazen recently noted in *al-Hayat* newspaper that a day of recognition for Darfur had been celebrated on the anniversary of the Sabra and Chatila massacres. His concern that this dreadful event—like Palestinian needs and refugees in general—was forgotten, not in the region, but by others in the world, was well-put. The world may be forgetting why people organize to resist—as Americans once struggled to liberate themselves from British control, and now only celebrate victimhood when it is brought to their attention by the media.

If we are serious about a two-state solution, we need to dedicate more time to the coming summit and ensure that all the relevant parties are there, meaning Hamas, or neutral politicians already on the Palestinian Legislative Council who can represent them. Let us hope that Israel does not impel the organization and its own Defense Forces to move back to the language of warfare.

The views expressed in this op-ed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. This op-ed is cleared for public release; distribution is unlimited.

Organizations interested in reprinting this or other SSI opinion pieces should contact the Publications Department via e-mail at *SSI_Publishing@conus.army.mil*. All organizations granted this right must include the following statement: "Reprinted with permission of the Strategic Studies Institute Newsletter, U.S. Army War College."