

Derailment of another peace effort

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The Israeli decision to consider killing or expelling Yasser Arafat from Palestine and the consequent defiant response of Arafat clearly indicate the direction of the current peace process in the Middle East. The American inability or unwillingness to restrain the Israeli from committing excesses is fast facilitating the derailment of the current peace process. In fact the Middle East peace process has undergone many stages of which three including the current process deserve comments.

Following the end of Arab-Israeli war of 1973, a peace process began which collapsed in 1982 over the issue of Israeli occupied Palestinian territories. In 1974 both the Egyptian and the Syrians signed agreements with the Israelis enabling Israel to withdraw from areas around the banks of Suez Canal and vacating Qonietra in Golan Heights respectively. In 1975 Egypt signed another agreement with the Israelis pledging non-belligerency and withdrawal of the Israelis from the Sinai passes. Although the peace process slowed down for sometimes but with President Sadat's Israeli visit in November 1977 it reactivated. President Sadat sent invitation to Arab leaders to participate in Arab-Israeli negotiations, which were held in Egypt in December 1977 but many Arabs including Jordanians, Syrians and Palestinians refused to participate in the negotiations. The negotiations did not make much progress because of two different approaches adopted by the Egyptians and the Israelis. The Egyptians wanted a comprehensive Arab-Israeli deals whereas the Israelis were insistent on Egypt-Israeli tangle. At this stage the American President

called the Camp David meeting (September 1978) and brokered a peace deal and a treaty between Egypt and Israel was signed in March 1979.

Most Arab states reacted rather strongly to the Egyptian-Israeli treaty and as a consequence of the treaty, Egypt was pushed out of Arab League and Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC). The framework for peace especially to secure Palestinians self rule in Gaza and West Bank was discussed but with no progress and by 1982 negotiations were suspended. Many Arabs along with PLO opposed Egyptian initiative to discuss self-rule on behalf of the Palestinians. With the outbreak of 1991 war resulting from Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the first stage of Middle East peace process ended.

The second stage started after the US-Iraq war of 1991. In March 1991 the US announced that it would try to find a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict in accordance with the UN Security Council Resolutions (242 and 338) and the principle of territory for peace. In this connection the American President sent his Secretary of State James Baker to the Middle East with a view to secure the consent of regional states for a peace conference. The Middle East Peace Conference was held at Madrid on October 30, 1991, which turned out to be a ceremonial exercise, failing to produce any tangible result.

In the meantime a secret channel between the Israelis and the Palestinians under the auspices of the Norwegians resulted in the announcement that PLO would recognise Israel's right to exist in accordance with the UN Resolution 242. This channel was



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the product of the first 'Intifada' which started in 1987 and Israel's inability to control the uprising. On September 13, 1993 the two parties signed a Declaration of Principles (DOP) enabling the PLO to have limited self-rule in West Bank and Gaza.

Extremist Israelis objected rather strongly to the peace overtures and even assassinated their Prime Minister Rabin in Nov 1995. Rabin was followed by the ascendancy of Netanyahu who headed a Likud-led coalition government. Netanyahu not only promised not to recognise a Palestinian state and to keep Jerusalem 'under Israel' but also abolished all restraints on settlements. Consequently many new settlements emerged favouring Palestinian land. In May 1997 Barak led a labour controlled coalition to power that only offered to vacate 15% of the settlements. The next initiative was undertaken by President Clinton, which after some protracted negotiations also failed primarily because of Israeli unbending stance and the American biased attitude.

The second 'Intifada' started following the controversial visit of Sharon to Al Aqsa. In Feb 2001 the government of Barak was replaced by a Sharon-led coalition government.

On 27th March 2002 Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah proposed normalcy and security for Israel in exchange for full withdrawal from the occupied Arab territories. Not only during the last 18 months of 'Intifada' many Palestinians had died in their quest for

independence but also with the advent of Sharon regime the violence level increased many-fold. Despite the fact that Sharon is known as the butcher of Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, the Israelis seemed to have voted for Sharon expecting that a hard line pursuit would bring the desired peace. Instead what has been witnessed ever since he assumed power is nothing but intensified violence.

The third stage is the announcement of the currently projected roadmap. Attempting to cash in on the general disunity of the Muslims and specific Arab weaknesses, the US has been overtly and covertly supportive of Israeli viewpoint. Most of the proposals that have been put forward by the Americans have either been accidentally very close to the Israeli thinking or were actually the work of Israeli supporter/sympathisers in US administration. The recent peace process began with the unfolding of the roadmap in May 2002. This time the peace plan was ostensibly supported by the Quartet, which included the US, the UN, the European Union and the Russia. The roadmap was released only after the election of Mahmoud Abbas also known as Abu Mazen.

Soon after the announcement of the roadmap the newly appointed Prime Minister of Palestine Mahmoud Abbas pledged to do his utmost to curb militant attack on Israeli civilians. In fact he was able to secure a three-month ceasefire from the Hamas. During the first 51 days of 'ceasefire' the militant Palestinian groups undertook no violent acts. However it needs to be mentioned that Israel continued its acts of suppression during this period.

Compared to the conditions set for the Palestinians, the Israelis were not subjected to that many restrictions. The two major concessions that were to be given by the Israelis included the ending of attacks on the civilian areas and the demolition of Palestinian homes/property and the dismantling of settlement outposts erected since the establishment of the present Israeli government. In the second stage of the first phase the Israelis are supposed to stop all settlement activities consistent with Mitchell report including the natural growth of settlements.

The second phase of the roadmap was supposed to begin from June 2003 and lasts up to Dec 2003. In this phase the emphasis is expected to be more on Palestinian political reform and security cooperation. For this 'Israel' the 'task' assigned during this phase is to withdraw from the areas occupied after September 2000 and freeze all settlement activities. In this stage the Quartet is expected to establish a permanent monitoring mechanism on the ground in congruence with the conditions that are expected to be produced by the efforts.

The third phase of the roadmap was supposed to tackle the most complex problems like the permanent borders of Palestine, the status of Jerusalem, return of refugees and settlements issue along with holding of international conference. Since not much efforts have been made to restrain the Israelis and in consequence not even the requirements of the first phase have been fully met, the current peace process appears to be well set on a derailment course. All parties involved need to live up to their commitments if they really want to see the process move ahead.