



Common Ground News Service - Middle East

Reaching across the divide (VII)

by Salameh Nematt

04 October 2007

WASHINGTON -

Dear Akiva,

Jordan's King Abdullah, whom you interviewed recently, addressed a rare joint session of the U.S. Congress earlier this month, stirring controversy that continues to reverberate in Washington. He argued that a settlement to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was crucial to peace and stability in the entire Middle East, and called on the U.S. to use its influence with Israel to help forge a lasting peace deal this year, saying that the continuation of the conflict is a threat not only to the region, but to global security.

His speech, described as a historic landmark by Jordanians and sympathizers, was either ignored or attacked by American pundits and politicians. The New York Times published a piece on the speech in its inside pages, while the Washington Post completely ignored it. Many members of Congress and political commentators and bloggers were appalled that the king would ignore Iraq and Iran and focus most of his speech on the plight of the Palestinians and how that was destabilizing the region. After all, if it were a matter of suffering, Iraqis have suffered more violent deaths in the past few months than the Palestinians and Israelis suffered in the past five decades. Indeed, Iraqis suffered the deaths of nearly 300,000 people buried in mass graves under Saddam Hussein's rule, even before the U.S. invasion of 2003. Iran, seeking a nuclear bomb, has not only contributed to destabilizing Iraq and Lebanon, but is also playing a destructive role in the Palestinian territories by supporting Hamas against Israel and the Fatah movement. Ultimately, very few in the U.S. seem to be convinced that advancing peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians would stop Iraqi Sunnis and Shiites from killing each other, or Iran's and Syria's allies in Lebanon, especially Hizbullah, which instigated a war with Israel last summer, from trying to topple the democratically-elected government in Lebanon. The question, from an American perspective, remains: why is it more important to the Middle East and the world that Israelis and Palestinians talk to each other rather than deal with the bigger and more widely exportable crises in Iraq and Lebanon in which Iran is the prime culprit?

I would like to hear your views on this controversy as it is at the heart of the regional and international geopolitical debate and policy-making. Indeed, no one denies the fact that the Palestinians and Israelis have suffered too long and that their conflict has been more polarizing on regional and global scales than any in history. But that was before the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the ensuing violence that gave ascendancy to a theocratic regime in Iran bent on regional hegemony, with a nuclear threat to boot. The Iraq war and its repercussions have given birth to a number of little wars spreading across the region, between Sunnis and Shiites, moderates and radicals, not to mention creating a new breed of jihadists, who make Palestinian militants look tame in comparison. This is not to belittle the huge suffering of the inhabitants of the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, but it does raise questions as to regional and global security priorities.

Dear Akiva,

In your recent interview with King Abdullah, the Jordanian monarch gave a hint of a possible breakthrough in the Palestinian-Israeli impasse that may be coming soon. Your reporting on secret Syrian-Israeli talks, which preceded the interview, also gave hope that something may be brewing beyond what we've witnessed in the past. Are you really hopeful that a grand gesture is about to be announced toward a historic opening for an Arab-Israeli peace? I'm asking because I have become sceptical and cynical of Middle East peace initiatives. We have both witnessed dozens of peace proposals and initiatives launched by various regional and international players, only to see them falter at the first genuine test. Do you foresee today an Israeli government willing to accommodate the minimum of Palestinian demands under the circumstances? Do you see a Palestinian leadership capable of transcending the past and internal strife to offer Israelis a minimum sense of security and hope for the future? Do you see an American administration, embroiled in Iraq and a confrontation with Iran, willing to go the extra mile to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat? I'll tell you, dear Akiva, that at this moment, I'm not optimistic.

Despite all that Ibrahim Suleiman may have told you about his conviction that the Syrians seek genuine peace with Israel, there is no indication that Damascus is willing to press Hamas to embrace the conditions set by the Quartet for relaunching peace negotiations. While Iran gave the nod to Hamas leader Khaled Mashal to endorse the Saudi-mediated Mecca agreement, we are yet to see a Palestinian unity government ready to recognize previously signed peace agreements with Israel. On the other side, it is not clear whether a very weakened Olmert government is capable of the type of grand gestures necessary to lead Israelis toward a compromise that could be reciprocated by the divided Palestinian leadership.

As I write you this letter, I recall my first visit to Israel in 1994, following the Jordan-Israel peace treaty. What was most striking about the nearly two-hour drive from the northern Jordanian-Israeli "Sheikh Hussein - Jordan River" border crossing toward Jerusalem, was the vast territory of uninhabited land along the way. I thought to myself at the time: there is so much land for both Israelis and Palestinians to live. Why do they insist on cancelling each other? I knew things were not that simple, but I wished they were.

Dear Akiva,

Forgive my pessimistic outlook on prospects of peace between your people and mine. As I see fellow Arabs killing each other in Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, I am much less hopeful that they would be prepared to make peace with the Israelis. Perhaps I'm wrong. I hope I'm wrong...

Salameh

###

* Salameh Nematt is a political analyst writing for Al Hayat International Arab newspaper (snematt@hotmail.com). This article is distributed by the Common Ground News Service (CGNews) and can be accessed at www.commongroundnews.org.

Source: Common Ground News Service (CGNews), 22 March 2007, www.commongroundnews.org
Copyright permission is granted for publication.