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Comment: Peace talks? Don't get your hopes up

By Gerald M Steinberg, August 26, **Share 20** 2 retweet 2010



A Palestinian artist puts the final touches to graffiti on a Gaza City wall. Will Fatah support compromises with Israel in order to stop Hamas, which rules Gaza, from extending its power into the West Bank?

Six decades of failed peace efforts have left most Israelis (and Palestinians) deeply skeptical about the prospects for success.

The pattern is familiar - a new American president, faced with major difficulties at home and abroad, hopes that a Middle East peace breakthrough will help solve many of these problems. He squeezes the leaders of both sides, and as neither wants the label of "spoiler", they go along with the charade.

But the efforts fail, as core differences over history, religion (particularly in Jerusalem), borders and sovereignty remain insurmountable.

Indeed, there are many reasons to expect that the difficulties in reaching a stable compromise, based on a "two state solution", will be even more pronounced in the Obama round. The catastrophic outcome of the Oslo process has increased Israeli concerns over security, and the demonisation campaign against Israel, including the allegations of "war crimes" and "apartheid", has led many Israelis to give up on international acceptance, with or without peace.

In parallel, Palestinians are deeply divided, with Hamas in control of Gaza, and the remnants of the PLO/Fatah group clinging to power in the West Bank. In the US, which is the only outside power with influence, the first 18 months of the Obama administration showed massive incompetence, and created even more problems.

Nevertheless, there is a slim basis for considering a positive outcome. Israelis are tired of the conflict and ready for a compromise that meets basic requirements. Polls consistently show that the majority want an end to the post-1967 stalemate (the "occupation"), without inviting renewed terrorism, as occurred following the Gaza withdrawal in 2005. Internationally recognised and defensible borders (not the 1949 cease fire lines) would have a number of positive impacts.

Prime Minister Netanyahu is aware of these realities, as are the Israelis who voted his government into office. In contrast to the hostile media campaigns referring to a "far-right ideology", Mr Netanyahu has evolved into a pragmatic leader, pursuing negotiations to protect Israel's vital interests. If terms emerge that will meet these requirements, he will be able to form a centrist

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