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On the Future of Palestine, the Middle East, and Our Well-Being

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Futurists understand that the fate of Palestine is on any list of the top ten critical challenges of our times. To make progress is to first clarify the near future of the entire Middle East. Then, weigh leading policy options; five are considered here. And finally, opt for one desirable future, and explain how it might be achieved.

THE CHALLENGE

1) Unless we do something soon to the contrary, the future of the Middle East would seem to threaten the well being of us all. Or so argues Richard N. Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations, in the November-December, 2006, issue of *Foreign Affairs*. He puts it spot-on: “Visions of a new, Europe-like region – peaceful, prosperous, democratic – will not be realized. Much more likely is emergence of a new Middle East that will cause great harm to itself, the US, and the World.”

Looking through a glass darkly, Haass forecasts that “militiazation” will continue, private armies will emerge, and terrorism will grow in sophistication. “Democracy belongs in the distant future, if at all.” Arab regimes are likely to remain authoritarian, and become more religiously intolerant (and anti-American). Despots will remain propped up by the price of oil: It is far more likely to exceed \$100 than fall below \$40; Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other large producers will benefit disproportionately.”

Where Palestine is concerned, “anything resembling a viable peace process is unlikely for the foreseeable future . . . the US has lost much of its standing as a credible and honest broker.” Instead, a new emerging Iran-Israel rivalry appears critical. Iran is likely to seek to remake the entire area in its image, and it has the potential to accomplish this.

Israel will vigorously oppose the effort (especially as Ahmadinejad, Iran’s president, has said Israel will be wiped away). “Militant groups backed by Tehran seem to be gaining strength all around Israel, bringing Iranian footsteps closer to Israeli ears from inside the Gaza Strip to just across the border in Lebanon.” (Simpson, A-1) Accordingly, Israel will become Iran’s only significant rival, as for a while, at least, it is the only state in the Middle East with a nuclear arsenal.

FUTURE-SHAPING POLICY OPTIONS

2) Given this bleak, if also persuasive assessment of current and prospective developments, the urgency of helping Palestine improve its prospects would seem greater than ever. Four leading future-shaping options beckon below, arranged in order of their likely future implementation. The first involves redefining relations between the Palestine Authority and Israel. The second, a step back into willful isolation. The third, a highly risky takeover. And the fourth, an implausible merger. (There is a fifth option, a package of hard compromises, best considered later.)

For openers, the Palestine Authority and Israel could jointly try to trump Hamas and Hezbollah. Today's undeclared civil war in Gaza could soon have weary Palestinians choose – with lingering ambivalence – between a more moderate Fatah and the more militant Islamists of Hamas (and, in Lebanon, Hezbollah). Should Israeli moves (for example, freeing up use of embargoed PA funds, or perhaps a release of a large number of prisoners) have the desired effect, Fatah could soon (honestly) win at the polls. New pro-peace developments could follow, in response to the kind of nonviolence and patient negotiation Abbas counsels so forlornly.

The problems with this scenario are obvious: Hamas and Hezbollah, both of which favor Israel's destruction, will do everything possible to undermine an Israel-Palestinian accord, as will Iran's Islamic Jihad. Israel, in turn, will not tolerate a resumption of urban suicide attacks and rocket damage deep inside the country (as from long-range missiles smuggled into Lebanon). Accordingly, powerful parties on both sides may yet conclude that compromise is unattainable.

This brings us to a second peace-seeking possibility, one soundly criticized recently by former president Jimmy Carter: Namely, a greater-than-ever divide between mutually antagonistic sides. (Carter) The separation barrier that now partitions the land, along with strict required passes, is given credit by Israelis for helping to reduce suicide attacks. A long-standing Israeli belief grows stronger: As the Palestinians lack a functioning government, and as anarchy reins in Gaza, Palestinian dysfunction persists as the main limiting factor on the peace process. Best have nothing more to do with them!

Palestine can have peace-of-a-sort, that is, the cessation of unpredictable Israeli military incursions and air bombings, though at the price of almost complete exclusion from its neighbors' lives (including being barred from valued jobs in Israel, and from commerce, medical care, schooling, etc.). Avigdor Lieberman, the new deputy prime minister, goes so far as to advocate stripping one million Palestinians living in Israel of citizenship and urging them to leave.

The problems with this isolationist scenario are obvious: The Middle East is too small for any such elaborate divide. Borders are porous, and the inter-dependency of the disputants goes back too many centuries to have them soon achieve any meaningful isolation from one another. The scenario has no winners, only losers.

Accordingly, a third policy option takes the form of a preemptive move, much like America's invasion of Iraq. Able to anticipate everything spelled out above, especially its threat to Middle East oil access, the EU, and/or NATO and/or the UN might employ a large well-armed "peace-keeping" force (Saudi, Egyptian, and Iraqi leaders would presumably first assent). NATO and/or UN "blue helmet" troops (bolstered by EU funds and do-gooders) would arrive to negotiate and supervise a new partition of the land.

The problems with this scenario are obvious: As the mess in Iraq (and that which looms in regard to Iran) makes clear, any occupying force almost immediately becomes unwelcome and becomes itself

the target for violence. Second, neither the EU nor the UN has any inclination to get bogged down in the Middle East. And third, it is most likely to result only first in a hudna (tactical truce), and inevitably later in catastrophe.

Finally, there is the option of soon creating a single bi-national state to combine both Israel and Palestine. Based on the principle of one person, one vote, it would presumably model for the world the ability of once-antagonistic peoples learning how to accommodate one another for the larger good.

The problems with this scenario are obvious: Israelis know full well Yasser Arafat's futuristic adage that the Palestinians' best weapon is the womb. They fear that in very few decades the high population-growth rate of new Arab citizens would swamp Jewish interests, and Israelis would find themselves a besieged minority in their former homeland ... a scenario that evokes "Never Again!" images of the Holocaust.

OUT OF OPTIONS?

3) If the status quo is untenable, as are also four leading options (reframed rivalries, intensified separation, outsider intervention, and a One State Solution), what is there left? Contrary to woeful futurists who insist history shows that many problems have no solution, the Palestine Challenge might be alleviated, if not entirely resolved, by a multi-party approach well worth the effort.

We Americans must help pave the way by reducing our addictive reliance on Arab oil. Only when the price of a barrel slides significantly down will Arab governments be forced to modernize their countries, and thereby reduce the power of Islamic fanatics within and outside their borders. Moderate Islamists could gain the ear of the Street, and fresh pro-peace thinking might gain support.

Second, European countries must rapidly grant significant economic opportunity to their young Muslims. These men and women, if granted educational and employment opportunities of substance by their host societies could steadily build a model of tolerant, prosperous Islam that would reverberate across the globe, this, the best possible refutation of the Jihadist approach.

While all of these changes are occurring, Israel must sensitively, but firmly withdraw over 200,000 citizens from 40-year old settlements in the occupied West Bank. This time, unlike Gaza in 2005, the pullout should be done in cooperation with a stable and responsible Palestinian government that has extreme terrorist groups under fierce control. Israel must also give up East Jerusalem, and predominantly Arab areas within its pre-1967 borders.

Only in this way can a contiguous, sound, and viable Palestine finally emerge, one strong in law and order... and equal to negotiating a financial compensation-for-land scheme, rather than a land grab, for 700,000 displaced Palestinians and their 5 million or so descendants. Land lost when seven Arab countries tried in 1948 to drive the Jews into the sea cannot be reclaimed over 60 years later: Compensation can and should be worked out, much as has been occurring all over Europe since the end of WWII.

Naturally, concessions must be agreed to beforehand that will permit a continued Israeli presence in a very few West Bank enclaves, along with guarantees of personal safety, etc. In return, Israel must step up any and all aid both in and outside its borders to Palestinian schooling, employment, and institutional infrastructure. For in few other places do conditions more demand that two people otherwise antagonistic to one another develop a symbiotic relationship.

Wishful thinking? No, as many future-oriented moderates quietly, if also persistently, support such a course of action. Only the bravery and life-risking actions of the area's many far-sighted moderates – Palestinian, Israeli, and others – can finally help renew the entire Middle East. For as journalist Tom Friedman has advised President Bush, "Whether it is Arab-Israeli peace or democracy in Iraq, you can't want it more than they do."

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POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

- Do you agree with Richard N. Haass's bleak forecast for the Middle East, as summarized by Professor Shostak? Why or why not?
- According to Haass (as summarized by Professor Shostak), oil is far more likely to exceed \$100 per barrel than fall below \$40, with disproportionate benefit to large producers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. But consider the other possibility. If somehow the price of oil falls dramatically (for example, as a result of changes in consumption and/or the advent of new energy sources), will that also be destabilizing to various governments?
- Haass states that the US has lost its credibility as an honest peace broker. In the larger context of worldwide perceptions of the US and other geostrategic factors, do you foresee a unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar world in 2020 – considering all instruments of national power (military, economic, and diplomatic) and the increasing role of non-state actors?
- Small militant minorities on either side of a longstanding and/or deep-rooted conflict can destroy trust and thwart peacekeeping and peacemaking processes, even without resorting to weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Who will have the advantage in 2020 – the peacekeeper/peacemaker forces or militant minorities?
- The tribal conflict in the Middle East predates the religions that trace their roots to the Middle East. With this in mind, do you see any possibility that all sides in present Middle East conflicts will tire of war and choose peace? Or is continued tribal warfare the wave of the future, especially considering that ethnicity may be one of the few surviving stable reference points and sources of identity?