



Photo by: Associated Press

Peace is not magic

By LARRY SNIDER
23/08/2010

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It does not take a prophet to look around the Middle East today and see signs of trouble. Veiled threats between governments, border clashes, rocket exchanges and increasingly dangerous confrontations are ratcheting up the warnings. And yet the Obama administration persists in its effort to thread the needle and bring Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu together beyond proximity talks to sit down and directly negotiate the terms for a lasting peace.

On the ground in the West Bank, PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad is promoting increasing economic development with the tacit approval of the Israeli government. A number of checkpoints and barriers have been removed, literally enfranchising the ability to produce and get goods to markets both within and beyond the borders of the West Bank. US Gen. Keith Dayton, again with Israeli approval, is busy training a Palestinian national security force that already has been successfully deployed into a number of areas of conflict including Jenin and Nablus.

These steps do not remove the difficult and painful issues surrounding Gaza, the blockade and its rule by a Hamas government that was duly elected in 2006 to lead the Palestinian legislature. Neither do they preclude the continuing efforts by the Iranian government to alter the regional balance of power through its development of a nuclear weapon, or its continuing seeding of both Hamas and Hizbullah with increasingly powerful and dangerous weapons. There are any number of internal problems and external efforts limiting the resolution of both Netanyahu and Abbas to move decisively toward a peace agreement without offering a list of objections that make real progress unlikely.

BUT THERE is another layer of activity in universities and schools, implemented by NGOs and supported by governments, foundations and corporations functioning all over Israel and the West Bank and even in Gaza. People are talking to each other on the Internet and in person.

Palestinians are learning that all Israelis are not violent soldiers and Israelis are learning that all Palestinians are not violent terrorists. There is dialogue and organizations such as the Interfaith Encounter Association, Middle East Nonviolence and Democracy, Givat Haviva and the Israeli/Palestinian Center for Research and Information are on the ground promoting understanding and building new relationships between people in east and west Jerusalem, across the wall and throughout the territories. There are international organizations, governments and foundations promoting this dialogue and enhancing the capacity of Palestinians and Israelis to develop positive new relationships including the Public Conversations Project, the Dialogue Institute, European People's Party and many others.

It is possible to connect the dots (all the dots) and with them the hopes and dreams of millions of people through a well-financed, well-articulated multimedia educational campaign to promote understanding between the two peoples, the acceptance of the "other" and, in turn, the acceptance of the terms of a lasting peace agreement. Peace is not magic. It is accessible to both sides and their international supporters if the governments work together with the media, NGOs, educators at all levels and those locally, regionally and internationally with the experience to collaboratively sell peace as forcefully as they have worked to sell war.

Building a coalition for peace that is beyond party, beyond borders, beyond religion and beyond the limits of liberal and conservative labels can create the gravitas necessary to make Middle East peace unavoidable. It

is not a naïve pipe dream to think that people of all political and religious persuasions can agree on the overwhelming need for peace now, even if they can't agree on the details. If we build the capacity for Israelis and Palestinians to undertake a national conversation on peace, we will establish the ability to walk together on that path and synergistically affect politicians and the public alike. Only from this new place can we look out together to see and reach the Promised Land.

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