ISRAEL-PALESTINE

Yoshiji Nogami

I will be making my points as a frequent traveller to the region and someone who has to travel through the infamous Israeli roadblocks very, very often.

Since the Intifada II, which started on 28th September 2000, well over 120 suicide bombings have certainly accomplished a couple of things, whether the instigators of the Intifada really intended or envisaged this beforehand. First, what was known as the Israeli “Peace Camp” has been completely undermined and the Oslo Accord has been completely de-fanged. With due respect to the Norwegians, the word “Oslo” is now a four-letter word in the region! Second, the harsh actions and counter-measures taken by the Israeli side during these three and a half years have completely debilitated Palestinian authorities and totally alienated the Palestinians. Going through roadblocks is not only cumbersome, but also really humiliating: I don’t think many of you have experienced this. These past three and a half years mark the mutual destruction of trust. Third, as a result of the very strong perception that there is no partner on each side, any agreement between them is impossible or meaningless. This perception has been established amongst the Israeli population as well as amongst the Palestinian population. In the case of Israel, this view is even held by intellectuals, who might otherwise be supporters of the peace process. This sentiment was further attested by the ousting of Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen, immediately after the successful Aqaba Summit. This ousting was done by the Fatah Central Committee, ergo Mr. Arafat. At the time of the summit, many Israelis, Palestinians and many outside the region thought the road starting from Aqaba may lead to Jerusalem, but many now feel that that was rather a mirage on the Red Sea. One of the key messages of the Geneva Accord by Yossi Beilin and Yasser Abed Rabbo or the People’s Voice by Sari Nusseibeh and Ami Ayalon was in fact that there is a partner and that agreement is possible. This was the key message. But people on both sides are highly sceptical of such a message and some would strongly condemn those who try to send out such a message.

Given such an environment, the unilateral disengagement of Israel from Gaza and northern Samaria is in fact a realistic, if not desirable, option. As it is supposed to be unilateral, the withdrawal is not contingent upon the performance criteria incorporated in the Road Map. Palestinian performance with respect to the prevention of terrorism and violence, incitement or reform is not really commendable. In fact, the performance criteria were something Mr. Sharon tried very hard to incorporate in the Road Map when it was being negotiated. Now, he has unblocked these performance criteria. This is opening up one realistic possibility. It is a very simple fact that withdrawal, even if limited, is much better than continuous occupation. Sensible Palestinians would wish to say that, although they cannot say it publicly. Furthermore, Prime Minister Sharon, who used to say things such as that the settlement in Gaza, Netzarim, was as important as Tel Aviv, can’t say that any more. This is a great advancement on the part of Mr. Sharon’s position.

The Hope of Disengagement

If one takes a close look at the disengagement plan and the letters exchanged between Prime Minister Sharon and President Bush or the letters sent out by Dov Weissglas to Condoleezza Rice, the disengagement plan is not unilateral in the precise meaning of the word. For, it obligates Israel, at least to the United States and it is an undertaking by Israel, at least as far as the U.S. is concerned.

Also, if you take a close look at what is incorporated in this disengagement plan, there is nothing spectacularly new. This is the incorporation of various elements that have been tried in the past. The
concept of “Gaza First” was already introduced by the famous Shimon Peres-Abu Ala plan. The future of such settlements such as Ma’ale Adumin or Gush Etzion, which are both adjacent to Jerusalem, is in a way envisaged in the Clinton Parameters of December 2000, the Taba negotiations and even in the Geneva Accord. The Geneva Accord has, on the basis of the examination of aerial photographs, the famous 1949 or 1969 ceasefire lines, or what is known in Israel as the Green Line. But you can’t say “return Ma’ale Adumin”. If you go there, you know why; it is very simple. If you see how closely Ma’ale Adumin and Gush Etzion are sort of incorporated into the western part of Jerusalem, you can’t simply say that it has to be returned. In the Clinton Parameters, there is the concept of the “one-to-one swap.” In the Geneva Accord, there is the concrete plan for a one-to-one swap: while Israel will be able to annex Ma’ale Adumin and Gush Etzion, it will also have to concede equivalent acreage of land in the Negev or in some cases northern Israeli villages where the Palestinian population is very, very high. So, these plans are already there. Of course, since this is a unilateral disengagement plan, land swaps are not incorporated at this juncture, but the idea is there. This is the achievement done by the people who worked on the Geneva Accord. Thus, when the time is right, these ideas can be brought in.

The disengagement plan provides an opening.

The withdrawal from 21 settlements in Gaza out of 21 is not really a bad score. Of course, 4 out of 100 in the West Bank is really, I would say, minute—Israel could have done more. But one thing that is very interesting is that Mr. Sharon is using the term “territorial contiguity” of Palestine. This is a very important element, particularly when they have to deal with a settlement like Ariel, where the population is large but isolated.

When the disengagement plan was announced, the Palestinian senior members quite understandably made canonical, stereotypical or textbook responses condemning it for killing the Road Map. But sensible Palestinians have very complex feelings toward the disengagement. Those who have been working on the Geneva Accord are saying that withdrawal is withdrawal and that withdrawal is much better than a continuation of occupation. The Likud referendum on last Sunday [May 2] was certainly a blow to Prime Minister Sharon in terms of Israeli domestic politics. But, after all, 59,900 votes are only 1% of the total population, 60% of which support the disengagement.

Unfortunately, reactions to the disengagement plan and the outcome of the U.S.-Israel summit by most European countries were also “canonical” and “textbook,” condemning, as usual, Israel and the United States. The same also applies to most Arab nations. In some cases, comments from Arab countries were more royal-than-the-king-type reactions. Although European governments are now slightly trying to readjust this position in the wake of the Likud referendum and the Quartet meeting that took place last week in New York, why couldn’t they grab this very interesting opportunity and say this is going to be a part of the first step of the Road Map, a part because it is a unilateral action on the part of Israel? The stalemate on the ground can only be broken through some tangible changes on the ground. Instead of talking, why not let Israel introduce these changes on the ground? This is the key message to the Europeans; secure the changes on the ground and prevent reversal. In the Middle East, many people try “to make eggs out of ommlette,” as in the famous words of Shimon Peres, but you have to prevent those who try to make eggs out of an omelette.

European countries do see the peace process through the transatlantic window. My comment is very simple. Israel and Palestine exist on the eastern part of Europe, not on the western part of Europe. Don’t look towards the West, but towards the East. The tendency of seeing the Israel-Palestinian issue mostly through the transatlantic window was quite obvious and visible in the days leading up to war against Iraq. On the streets of Europe, demonstrators carried many Palestinian flags and anti-Bush and anti-Sharon slogans. As a result of this, Israel, in turn, talks only to the United States—it tries to put all its “eggs” in the “American” basket. Once again, this frustrates the European side. This vicious circle has to be broken. Come to think of it, the famous Quartet, which is strongly promoted by the European side, is a transatlantic instrument. It is an instrument where Europeans make comments to the United States, not to the direct parties in the region because the direct parties—neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians—are not involved in this Quartet process. So in view of the significance of this issue, there has to be some sort of international mechanism where the two direct parties are also
incorporated. The United States, the European Union and, perhaps, Japan really have to think hard about some sort of institutional arrangement where the key non-regional members, key Arab members and the two direct parties can sit together and make comments to each other. In fact, when Europe tries to pressurise Israel, it has to go through the United States, telling Americans to keep up the pressure on Israel. I think this is a very strange situation. Why don’t we have a format where everybody sits down together?

At this stage, two things have to be done. The first is to lock Israel into the disengagement plan as originally proposed by Prime Minister Sharon. Otherwise, he may backtrack given the very strong domestic pressure. Secondly, concerned parties, like those sitting here, have to tell the Palestinians to unilaterally implement what they have to do on the Road Map, at least as far as the first stage is concerned: namely, to do something about the security situation and about reform. A situation where a reform-minded Palestinian minister like the Finance Minister has to face the procrastination or obstruction by a resident of the Muquatta has to be rectified. A very interesting anecdote: the Finance Minister wanted to pay salaries to security officers via direct deposit in bank accounts. The current practice is to give a lump sum to the heads of the security forces. In order to get this direct disbursement, it took six months. This sort of situation has to be rectified.

If, as Dominique Moïsi said, Europe has a strong leaning towards the Palestinians, lean against them, lean on them. By saying that, the Palestinians have to do something for the benefit of the Palestinians. This does not have to be a commitment to Israel, but it can’t be a unilateral action.

Asian Oil Dependence, Asian Peace Efforts

A few concluding words on Japan. Japan and the countries in East Asia have a vital stake in the political stability in the Middle East. This has been mentioned a number of times today. Whereas the United States and Europe have been steadily decreasing their dependence on Middle Eastern oil, countries in Asia, including Japan, have been steadily increasing their dependence on Middle Eastern oil. The internal, political stability of the countries in question is thus vitally important to countries in Asia, particularly in the Far East. China’s dependence on Middle Eastern oil is rapidly increasing. China is now the largest importer of Iranian oil in the world. The petrochemical industries in South-East Asia rely very heavily on crude oil supplies from the region. The external threat to stability is also a vital concern. Saddam was therefore a vital concern to us. Iranian nuclear development is a potential external destabilising element. But, more fundamentally, the internal, political situation of those nations in the Middle East should be a vital concern for the countries in Asia.

Despite its increasing dependence on Middle Eastern oil, what countries in Asia, including Japan and Korea, have been doing in the international efforts to bring about internal, political stability is not really commensurate with their dependence on oil. Of course, Japan and Korea have sent forces to Iraq and Japan is putting up a huge amount of money for the reconstruction of Iraq. But there are things where Japan can do much better, for instance, in improving the reality on the ground in Palestine and in many, many other countries where reform is needed. The UNDP Human Development Report points out that Arab nations have no time to procrastinate or to say that reform must wait until the Israel-Palestine situation is settled. They have a ticking bomb. The average Israeli youth can expect his income to double in 20 years. The average Arab youth has to wait 140 years before his income doubles. This situation is untenable.

As Jim Steinberg suggested, what the Sea Island summit is trying to do is commendable. Why can’t Europe say “that’s OK with us because we are in this together,” without setting any sort of conditions, like insisting on European distinctiveness? Why can’t Europe say, “we are in this together, no conditions, no strings attached”? Europe is strong enough to be able to say that.

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