The World From Here
By Dan Diker and Harold Rhode

Will Abbas defy Islam for peace with Israel?

Israel’s release of convicted Palestinian terrorists and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s reported agreement in principle to concessions in the Jordan Valley beg an important question: Can Israeli concessions influence the Palestinians to sign an historic peace deal that ends the Arab-Israeli conflict once and for all? The experience of former prime ministers Barak and Olmert with their Palestinian counterparts may be helpful in understanding that even the most far-reaching Israeli concessions have failed to end the conflict for an historically under-appreciated reason: Palestinian Authority chairman Mahmoud Abbas would be required to defy Islam’s view of territorial sovereignty to arrive at a compromise with Israel. In short, once Islam conquers territory, it remains Muslim forever.

Two recent historical examples illustrate the problem. Following the collapse of the ill-fated Camp David Accords in 2000, former prime minister Ehud Barak summed up his experience negotiating with former PA chairman Yasser Arafat and the PA leadership in a “tell all” interview with Israeli historian Benny Morris. Barak said, “What they [Arafat and his colleagues] want is a Palestinian state in all of Palestine... Arafat does not recognize the existence of a Jewish people or nation, only a Jewish religion.”

According to the Barak interview, “Arafat denied that any Jewish temple has ever stood on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and this is a microcosm of his denial of the Jews’ historical connection and claim to the Land of Israel/Palestine, which from his point of view has been Muslim since it was conquered by Islam in 637 CE. Hence, in December 2000, Arafat refused to accept even the vague formulation proposed by former US President Bill Clinton positing Israeli sovereignty over the earth beneath the Temple Mount’s surface area.”

Dennis Ross also noted in his book, A Missing Peace, that Arafat even refused to concede the ancient Jewish Western Wall to Israel. Abbas is also “claiming” by Islam’s view of territory. As Arafat’s loyal deputy at the time, and as Abbas’s predecessor, Abbas similarly denied the existence of Israel’s ancient temple as recently as July 2012, telling an Israeli Arab daily, “Anyone who wants to forget the [Islamic] past [i.e., the Israelis] cannot come and claim that the [Jewish] temple is situated beneath the Haram [the Muslim shrine].”

Abbas’s dedication to Islam’s uncompromising sovereignty over Muslim territory also explains his rejection of Olmert’s equally far-reaching peace offer in 2008. Olmert would later recall in a 2009 interview Abbas’s zerosum stance on Jerusalem, saying, “I would never agree to an exclusive Muslim sovereignty over areas that are religiously important to Jews and Christians.”

Barak and Olmert’s recollections provide context to Abbas’s approach to the current negotiations with Israel. The prime ministers’ post mortems also illustrate a tenet of Islam that has been frequently overlooked by western mediators and negotiators, but which claims fealty in the Muslim world regardless of personal levels of religious observance. Islamic jurisprudence dictates that once Muslim lands have been conquered by non-Muslims, it is prohibited for Muslims to let non-Muslims rule those lands. Muslims must ultimately reconquer them.

Professor Bernard Lewis, the preeminent western scholar of Islam and the Near East, remarks in his most recent book, Notes on a Century, regarding the view of Islam on territorial rule, “that Muslims should rule over non-Muslims is right and normal. That non-Muslims should rule over Muslims is an offense against the laws of God and nature and this is true whether in Kashmir, Palestine, Lebanon, or Cyprus.”

Lewis recalled his own visit to a local Islamic Center in Cordoba whose members are still seeking to reconvert Spanish Christians to Islam and reconquer Spain that Islam lost over 500 years ago.

If after 521 years Islam still rejects Spain as Christian, it is unsurprising that 65 years of reestablished Jewish sovereignty in Israel collides with Abbas’s refusal to accept Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people. In Abbas’s view, Israel, like Spain, Lebanon, Cyprus and the other lands of the Middle East, remains Islam’s inheritance forever. If he were to concede territory to Israel, he would subject himself to the Middle Eastern concept of “el fit’ or humiliation and shame whereby others blame him for shaming the Palestinians, the Arab world and Islam as a whole by what is called “compromise” in the West.

Arafat claimed that he would be assassinated for signing a final peace deal with Israel. This is just as true for Abbas. As Egyptian commentator Ali Salim observed recently, “PA President Mahmoud Abbas undoubtedly knows that the minute he signs a peace deal with Israel, the Palestinian terrorist organizations will assassinate him.” Ironically perhaps, Saudi Arabia and Egypt had reportedly pushed Arafat to sign a deal with Israel in 2000. How is it possible that Arab Muslim leaders would seemingly compromise on this immutable Islamic principle that Muslim territory cannot be conceded to non-Muslims? Had he agreed to a peace deal with Israel, only Arafat personally would have been humiliated, which would not have mattered to the Saudis or the Egyptians. That is why they only pressured Arafat privately, not publicly. Otherwise Egypt and Saudi Arabia would have been shamed as well.

Peace process observers may remember a humiliated Hosni Mubarak calling Arafat “a dog” when Arafat balked at signing the Gaza Jericho agreement with Israel in Cairo in 1994. In sum, Islam cannot permit non-Muslims to rule territories permanently that are or were once Muslim. Nevertheless, Muslims can make temporary agreements when they are weak, modeled after the agreement made by their prophet Muhammad made after his military loss at Hudaybiya in 629. Later, when Muhammad was stronger, he abrogated this agreement and defeated his enemies.

Hudaybiya therefore has ramifications, not only for Spain and Israel, as explained above, but also for other countries such as India and northwestern China which had been ruled by Muslims for centuries. Hudaybiya is equally relevant to Abbas. Like the Muslim prophet, he may agree to an interim accord due to his current weakness. But as former prime minister Barak noted in 2002, the Palestinians will always look for excuses to refrain from signing an end-of-conflict agreement.

As Israel Radio reported on December 31, 2013, Abbas now insists “all Palestinian prisoners must be released to reach an agreement.” He simply cannot agree to a permanent peace treaty that ends the conflict and all Palestinian claims and recognizes Jewish sovereignty over any part of what was British Mandatory Palestine.

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