



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

It Is Time for Abbas to Take Positive Action

by Jose V. Ciprut

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 557, August 10, 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Is Mahmoud Abbas, like Yasser Arafat before him, stalling the peace process out of fear that no agreement would be sufficiently maximizing? By now he should have learned that the best deals are those signed with confidence, in mutual trust and good will; and that he stands to gain a great deal through constructive action rather than destructive antics. Those who lead know that decisive journeys start with a risky first step.

Palestinian Authority (PA) Chairman Mahmoud Abbas's erratic moods make his purported pursuit of a "just and durable peace" with Israel more suspect than ever. The Israeli-Palestinian imbroglio has been allowed to fester for decades by a PA reluctant to resolve matters either directly with Israel or with the help of the US or the Quartet.

Following the recent murder on the Temple Mount of two Israeli policemen by Israeli Arabs who had smuggled lethal weapons into the al-Aqsa Mosque, Abbas chose to "freeze" relations with Israel rather than swiftly arrange tripartite consultations with Israel and the Waqf. In so doing, he acted in concert with the Arab League's warnings about "red lines" and in unison with the incendiary declarations of the OIC's current term chairman, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who ordered the "umma" worldwide not only to pray in Jerusalem, but to "protect" it.

Instead of disqualifying himself from the trust of the democratic Jewish State of Israel, which remains his sole direct interlocutor for any "peace partnership" worthy of the name, Abbas should desist from allying himself with passersby he mistakes as able to bully Israel into submission. He should cease his backstabbing stratagems at the UN and via UNESCO, and should speak with Prime Minister Netanyahu face-to-face. If Abbas makes those choices, and carries them to their natural conclusion, he can enter history as a giant figure.

Abbas is of an age to have seen *Hell in the Pacific*, a 1968 World War II film directed by John Boorman and featuring Lee Marvin and Toshirō Mifune. They are the only two protagonists in the film: enemy soldiers stuck in a small island who are unaware

that the war has ended. They seek to neutralize one another, using whatever means they can find in the confined wilderness in which they are stranded.

For lack of an honorable way out, whereby neither party could later reproach itself for having given up too much too soon, this puerile tug of war gradually becomes less existential. As the antagonists loosen their grip on the principle of never losing face, they start to make room for collaboration.

Once they take this step, they discover the bliss inherent in the wisdom of defying principled rigidity in favor of resilient flexibility. They move from denial to mutual acknowledgment to bonding, and ultimately to peaceful coexistence for the common good.

This plot is feasible in an island environment, wherein the two protagonists have no alternative but to look each other in the eye and decide the best way out of their misery. Admittedly, this scenario has little if any commonality with how things stand in the Middle East, which contains a multitude of biased insiders and opinionated outsiders. Moreover, in the Israel-Palestine context, there is no circumstance permitting mutual public admiration. Peace through direct negotiations appears more elusive than ever.

Nevertheless, the story of *Hell in the Pacific* is relevant in several ways.

When the American discovers the Japanese is secretly building a raft for himself only, he scolds him for it. As he possesses greater technical skills, he suggests they join forces to build a raft for two. This shifts the focus from antagonism to hope. As they turn their attention to the size and stability of the raft they are constructing, their relations are strengthened.

Their reliance on and trust in one other are justified once they set sail, when they overcome the reef's choppy waves and enter deep water.

Upon landing at an archipelago, they find barracks that are in fact postwar military test-firing grounds. Briefly, their primal differences rise up, since each assumes "the base" belongs to his nation's armed forces. They quickly overcome these first reactions – so much so that, imagining that US forces are in hiding, the American shouts warnings against shooting the other man he now considers a friend.

Realizing they are on abandoned ground, the two sworn enemies rummage around for items of first necessity – shaving supplies, a bottle of wine, cigarettes. They shave, then toast each other for the first time as civilized human beings. They do so with no knowledge of what the future holds for either of them.

The moral of this story is for Mahmoud Abbas to figure out the good of his own people. Time is short, and options are becoming sparser. The road from statelessness to salvation is rough and long. It is time to set forth.

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BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family