

Uncertainty over Planned Peace Conference

With Hamas successfully consolidating its grip on the Gaza Strip and with the growing disenchantment with Fatah in the West Bank, it is unclear if Abbas even has a clear mandate from his people to reach an agreement with Israel, comments *Rupert Fisher*



President Mahmoud Abbas with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert

Less than a month before the planned U.S.-sponsored Middle East peace conference in Annapolis, Maryland, Israelis and Palestinians are seeking to lower expectations for fear that failure would boost radicals on both sides.

At this stage it is not even clear if the conference will take place. The original date set for the parleys was mid-November, but U.S. Administration officials are now talking about possible postponement because of the wide gap between the two sides.

The main differences centre on the explosive

issues of Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees, and the borders of the future Palestinian state. Despite intense U.S. diplomatic efforts over the past few months, there has been no agreement on these issues.

Also, even if the two sides reach an agreement, will they be able to sell it to their people?

Given the huge challenges facing Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, there is growing scepticism among U.S., Arab and Israeli political analysts about the outcome of the meeting.



Palestinians at a check post (above)
Dismissed Palestinian PM Ismail
Haniya (right)

'It appears that Israelis and Palestinians are still not prepared for an historic deal', commented a Ramallah-based analyst. 'It would be much better if the Americans agreed to delay the conference.'

The Israelis say they do not believe that Abbas is a reliable partner who can deliver. They do not even believe that their prime minister can persuade a majority of Israelis to make 'painful concessions', such as dividing Jerusalem and withdrawing to the pre-1967 borders. Olmert is facing many challenges at home, especially from within his shaky government coalition. His popularity in Israel has plummeted because of his bad performance during last year's war with Hizbullah and numerous financial corruption scandals hovering over his head.

On the Palestinian front the situation is even more complicated. The Hamas-Fatah power struggle has left the Palestinians in disunity and schism. Today, the Palestinians have two separate entities: one in the Gaza Strip, home to some 1.5 million Palestinians and controlled by Hamas, and another in the West Bank, also home to some 1.5 million Palestinians, controlled by Abbas' Fatah faction and the Israelis.

Not only is Hamas challenging Abbas on the issue of the conference, the criticism comes even from members of



his own faction and many other Palestinians with different political affiliations.

Hamas and other radical Palestinian groups are planning a conference in Damascus, Syria, in November in a bid to undermine Abbas and question his right to represent all Palestinians at Annapolis. The meeting is expected to bring together hundreds of Palestinians from all walks of life.

Abbas' real problem, his critics say, is that he still has not absorbed the fact that Fatah first lost an election to Hamas in January 2006 and later lost control over the Gaza Strip. Instead of drawing conclusions from these two 'disasters', they say, Abbas continues to behave as if nothing dramatic has happened. Over the past two years he has repeatedly ignored demands for major reforms that would see fresh and charismatic leaders emerge from within the ranks of Fatah.

Abbas' decision to appoint Ahmed Qurei as head of the negotiating team surprised not only disgruntled Fatah activists but a large number of Palestinians. Young Fatah operatives see the former Speaker and former Prime Minister as being responsible, together with his old guard colleagues, for Fatah's poor performance and subsequent defeat in the 2006 parliamentary election. Other Palestinians hold Qurei responsible for what they see as failure of the Oslo Accords, where they say he should have struck a better deal with Israel.

Pressure on Abbas comes from other Arab countries as well. The Egyptians, Jordanians and Saudis also favour delaying the conference because of their conviction that the gap between Israel and Palestinians remains as wide as ever. These 'moderate' Arabs fear that failure at the conference would undermine their power base and play into the hands of Hamas and other radical elements throughout the Arab world.

Abbas' worst nightmare is where Israel and the U.S. would hold him personally responsible for failure of the Annapolis meeting, as happened with his predecessor Yasser Arafat following the botched Camp David summit in 2000. As one of his aides said, 'President Abbas is caught between the anvil and the hammer. On the one hand, the Palestinians will condemn him if he brings them anything less than what he promised. On the other hand, his refusal to make concessions at the conference will be used by the Israelis and Americans to hold him responsible for failure of the peace process.'

Under the circumstances, where Abbas' control over even the West Bank is questionable, it is highly unlikely that he can strike an historic deal on extremely sensitive issues such as Jerusalem, the refugees, and the borders. Some Palestinians are convinced that had it not been for the presence of the IDF (Israel Defence Forces) in the West Bank, Fatah would have succumbed to Hamas a long time ago. With Hamas successfully consolidating its grip on the Gaza Strip and with the growing disenchantment with Fatah in the West Bank, it is unclear if Abbas even has a clear mandate from his people to reach an agreement.

Aware of these challenges, some U.S. officials have begun lowering expectations from the conference, saying they never expected a 'major breakthrough' anyway.