

A new potential for peace and a Palestinian State.

A little over a week ago, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert announced his intention to meet with Palestinian President Abbas to try to revive the Israel-Palestinian peace process that many have written off as futile. Progress since then has been unusually rapid. Palestinian President Abbas and Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni have met in New York and both have met with the US Administration and spoken at the UN.

In her speech to the UN General Assembly Livni quoted from a speech former prime minister Ariel Sharon gave a year ago in the same forum in which he publicly accepted that the Palestinians were "also entitled to freedom and to a national, sovereign existence in a state of their own." Livni was unusually blunt in saying that a two-state solution required the creation of a new reality where "both sides will need to commit to compromise and to believe in coexistence." Focussing on Hamas' self-imposed exclusion from the peace process, she said, "the Palestinian Authority is dominated today by a terrorist organization that teaches children to hate and seeks to transform the conflict from a resolvable political dispute into an endless religious confrontation."

Almost simultaneously Hamas and Fatah have agreed to form a national unity government for the Palestinians, with Abbas and the PLO taking control of the crucial Foreign Affairs portfolio. Abbas's major conditions include demands that Hamas accept the peace initiative announced by the Arab summit in Beirut in 2002, abide by all United Nations resolutions regarding the Israeli-Arab conflict and honour the agreements that were signed between Israel and the Palestinians.

Meanwhile Ismail Haniyeh said he was prepared for a hudna if Israel withdrew to the 1967 borders. The talk about a hudna only confirms Hamas's long-standing position that it is opposed to Israel's right to exist. It emphasises that any agreement with Israel must be seen only as a temporary measure preceding Israel's dismemberment. Yet, behind the scenes,

Fatah is applying pressure to Hamas to relent on its rejection of these conditions. Senior Fatah politician, Nabil Shaath, said publicly this week, after the Fatah-Hamas talks were suspended by Fatah. "They are afraid that a unity government would deny them the achievements they made in the last parliamentary election," he said. "Hamas has yet to grasp the idea that a national unity government would end the isolation of the Palestinians on the international arena."

President Abbas has long understood that perpetuating the conflict has brought only despair and economic ruin to the Palestinians. This week he reiterated to President Bush: "The Palestinian people desire peace, and there is no power on Earth that can prevent the Palestinian people from moving toward the peaceful solution and living and coexisting in peace". Abbas knows that an end to terrorism could be accompanied by Israeli steps to help normalise Palestinian life.

Israel needs a Palestinian partner to work with it to formulate peace terms that would include establishment of a democratic Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Even though they voted in a Hamas government, a majority of Palestinians know that the old dream of destroying Israel is unattainable and are prepared to accept a final settlement that will create a Palestinian State alongside, and not in place of, Israel.

Meanwhile, Israel's economy has powered forward and its political and military ties with NATO have been strengthened. Palestinians hitherto have regarded the idea of living peacefully with Israel as dishonourable, a violation of their emotions and, for many, their religion. But as they survey the ruination to which they have been reduced by their refusal to abandon the war with Israel, few Palestinians will find anything particularly honourable about their present situation. Blaming others for the lawlessness in Hamas-controlled Gaza and the failure to even attempt to start building a viable State rings very hollow indeed. Ending the war with Israel would enable Palestinians to focus on the vital tasks of nation-building. It would mean growing their economy, generating new industry and creating jobs. Would this really be so dishonourable? The dignified self-determination that Palestinians genuinely and

rightly desire will only come when Palestinians commit to peace and a corruption-free, progressive economy.

There is real danger in a Palestinian sense of grievance that is so strong that it may prevent the painful compromises that peace and prosperity require. The so-called Palestinian 'right of return' which embodies that sense of grievance reflects a claim that all Palestinian Arabs have a right to return to or live in their, or their forbears', pre-1948 homes while Jews may not settle in areas inhabited by Palestinian Arabs. This is an argument for a Palestine where Arabs have a right of self-determination but Jews don't. Apart from the inherent inequity of this position, most of the 1948 refugees are no longer alive. Most of their houses and farms no longer exist. After 58 years things move on. The 600,000 Jewish refugees who were evicted from Arab countries after 1948, and their descendants, have claimed compensation but not a right of return. Both morally and practically, this is a superior approach, and appropriate compensation is inherently negotiable.

It is in Hamas' self-interest to jettison its refusal to ever recognize Israel, even if the national unity government did. Taking that line is a dead end politically. It will not gain Hamas the perception of legitimacy that it seeks on the international stage. It will leave the Palestinian economy twisting in the wind.

A real opportunity for Palestinians to enjoy economic progress, freedom from Israeli interventions and peace is beckoning. Hamas must grasp the opportunity, under the cover of a national unity government to begin the shift away from its destructive rejectionism.

And essential to the prospects for a durable peace is a fresh start for the coming generations; the youth of today. Young Israelis are growing up wondering who of their Arab neighbours can be their friend and who will come close only to detonate yet another suicide bomb. Young Palestinians are growing up to equate young Israelis with army uniforms and guns. They will find it hard to let go of imagery in textbooks that glorifies violence against

Jews and ignores Israel's right to exist. the teaching of hatred and prejudice must end now. It is akin to feeding poison to one's children.

It will take a brave Palestinian leadership to pursue a fresh start to peace negotiations. A new unified government might focus on the benefits for the Palestinian people of accepting painful compromise. Having done so, they will realise that ending terror and accepting Israel will enable them to breath life into the Palestinian economy and participate in a peace process from which all in the region could benefit. They will then find a willing partner on the Israeli side.

It will take courage by party to accept that the humanity, dignity and legitimate aspirations of the other are no less worthy than their own.

- David D. Knoll

David D. Knoll is President of the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies. He has taught international law and international peacemaking in both the United States and Australia.