

Has the Tunnel Collapsed? Thoughts on the Middle East Peace Process

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Israel and Palestine have put in ten long years trying to emerge from the dark tunnel of conflict into lasting peace. In 1993 and 1995, the Oslo Agreements gave off a glimmer of hope that the end of tunnel was in sight, but the vicious circle of suicide bombings and retaliatory attacks plunged the path ahead into darkness once again. As this drama unfolds, how are we to envision Japan's part in the Middle East peace process?

Some observers have suggested that while the twin towers of the World Trade Center may have been a symbolic target for Osama bin Laden and his deputy Aiman al Zawahri, the “ultimate twin towers” of their cause are the nations of Saudi Arabia and Egypt. In their war against terrorism since the 11 September attacks, the United States and its allies have declared repeatedly that the enemy is terrorism and not Islam nor any Arab peoples. Nonetheless, in many Arab countries, particularly on the “Arab street” (public opinion in the Arab world), when bin Laden’s “declaration of war” calls for a *jihad* (holy war) against Crusaders and Jews, and the infidels and idolaters who aid them (the World Trade Center being, presumably, an idol of the twenty-first century), the word *jihad* tends to strike a sympathetic chord among Arab Muslims, even if it is used in an extremely perverse way to justify acts of terrorism.

Such sympathy can be interpreted as a nostalgic yearning at the popular level for an *umma* (Islamic community) in the “holy war” bin Laden calls for. In those Arab countries trying to maintain a fragile balance between the axis of modernization and secularization on the one hand and that of Salafism (a movement to “purify” Islamic societies from corruption) on the other, this sympathetic response is creating an unwieldy political climate where one of those axes has been shifted far to the left. This political difficulty is most pronounced in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the two headquarters of the Islamic purification movement, and that is why these two countries are the “ultimate twin towers” of the radical Islamic cause.

With population growth running at almost 3 percent in recent years, half of Saudi Arabia’s population is now made up by people aged fifteen or younger. As personal income steadily declines and unemployment among the younger generation soars, dissatisfaction among Saudi Arabians is at a high point. Significantly, of the nineteen people thought to have carried out the 11 September attacks, fifteen are believed to be Saudi nationals. In Egypt, whose

president Anwar Sadat was assassinated by the Gama al Islamia, a radical group to which Aiman al Zawahri belongs, the government is trying to rid itself of all terrorist groups, but there, too, the low-income population is enormous. Egyptian Islamic radicals were among the perpetrators of the previous attack on the World Trade Center in 1993.

Further complicating the issue, the urge for jihad seems to be felt not only among the poorer and less educated masses in these societies, but also by many in the ranks of the highly educated. This emerges in diverse ways—in opinions expressed on the Internet and in such phenomenon as the publication of a poem in praise of Palestinian suicide bombers written by a Saudi ambassador.

Tom Friedman of the *New York Times* regards the escalation over the past two years of the second Palestinian *intifada* (popular revolt) and the relentless Israeli retaliations against those attacks as “the fifth Arab-Israeli war.” The circumstances surrounding Middle East peace negotiations in the wake of the 11 September attacks and the current fifth Arab-Israeli war are very different from those that followed both the fourth Arab-Israeli war of 1973 and the Gulf War. Any consideration of the Middle East peace process in its present state must take into account these shifts in the Arab world, especially the swing in popular sentiment and the concern it has aroused among Arab political leaders.

Behind-the-scenes Efforts toward the Oslo Agreement

The search for peace in today’s Middle East, initiated at the Madrid conference of October 1991, was launched against the backdrop of overwhelming power demonstrated by the United States during the Gulf War that had just ended. The peace process was a multilayered process made up of direct bilateral political negotiations between the United States and the parties directly concerned—Israel, Jordan, Palestine (at the beginning the Palestinian representatives participating as part of the Jordanian delegation), Syria, and Lebanon—and multinational negotiations on such issues as economic development, the environment, water resources and refugees, beginning with the Moscow conference of January the following year that involved these central parties (except Syria and Lebanon) plus Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf countries; other Arab countries, including Egypt and Morocco; and Japan, Russia, and various countries in the European Union (EU), as well as the United States. The process was structured as a kind of Middle East version of the Locarno system, in which the United States, Russia, Japan, the EU, and certain Arab nations guaranteed dialogue among the parties directly concerned, while the United States because of its overwhelming influence, dominated the bilateral political negotiations.

When the peace process began, the Israeli government was led by Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, then leader of the Likud party, the same party currently in power under Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Operating on a platform of Eretz Israel (Greater Israel), the Shamir administration took an extremely hardline stance. It made the name “Palestine” into a political taboo, and began

calling Palestine “Judea-Samaria.” It demanded that the Palestinian delegations with which it negotiated include no members of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), then based in Tunisia, and no Palestinians from East Jerusalem, which Israel does not consider occupied territory. Even after the peace negotiations began, the Israeli government of that time also continued to expand its settlements on the West Bank. Even taking into account the large-scale migration of Jewish Russians fleeing the turmoil in Russia after the fall of the Berlin Wall that Israel was trying to cope with at the time, that expansion created an extremely strained atmosphere for the talks.

For its part, the Palestinian side were extremely displeased at having to take part in the talks as part of Jordan’s delegation. PLO leaders in Tunis took the view that, since they were barred from the talks, they

could not grant effective negotiating powers to a negotiation team limited to representatives from the West Bank and Gaza. Syria, meanwhile, took part in the bilateral peace talks, but, insisting on the immediate and full return of the Golan Heights territory occupied by Israel during the Arab-Israeli war of 1973, refused to participate in the multilateral negotiations.

Having adopted a position of support for Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War, the Palestinian side could not count on Gulf countries, among others, to take a pro-Palestine position. Given these factors, even though the peace process had begun, considerable time was spent just debating “the shape of the negotiating table,” thereby leading the process away from the goal of confidence-building.

As the peace process languished, the Israeli general election of July 1992 gave rise to a Labor Party government under Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, with Shimon Peres as foreign minister and the young Labor Party peace faction leader Yossi Beilin as deputy foreign minister. The new Labor administration veered away from the policy of the ousted Likud government by taking a more active pro-peace stance, which was an important factor leading to its election victory in the first place. The shift in Israel’s position created a welcome, fresh mood at the peace talks. This turn toward a more constructive approach, however, was not the outcome simply of the election results. Just as important were certain behind-the-scenes efforts which, pursued in parallel to these overt developments, came to be known as the “Oslo process.”



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Watching the bilateral political talks in Washington get bogged down on the question of who would be admitted to the negotiating table, Norwegian diplomat-sociologist Terje-Roed Larsen recognized that the main reason for this was the lack of dialogue between Israel and the Tunis-based PLO leadership. Early in 1992, he met with Beilin, whose party was in the opposition at that time. The two agreed on the need for a “second track” toward peace, and efforts were made toward developing such an alternative process. Given that Israel’s public officials were at that time prohibited by law from having any contact with the PLO, behind-the-scenes dialogues with the PLO were arranged through University of Haifa professor Yair Hershfeld, as Israel’s second track spokesperson, and Faisal Husseini, leader of the Palestinian delegation in the peace talks. In the context of the Middle East peace process, such covert action is far from easy to carry out, and it was guaranteed to be very dangerous. This was tragically illustrated by the fate of PLO moderate Isam Saltawi. In 1983, Saltawi and Shimon Peres, then leader of the opposition in Israel, made plans, again through the mediation of Norway, to meet during the Socialist International conference, but Saltawi was assassinated by PLO militarists before any meeting took place.

The plans for a second track led to five secret meetings between the Israeli representative and PLO leaders that were held during sessions of the multilateral Middle East peace talks, symposia in Norway, and other suitable occasions. At the sixth secret meeting, held in May 1993, this process finally drew the participation of a representative of the Israeli government itself, foreign minister Peres’s deputy and close confidante Uri Savir.

It was only after many hurdles and setbacks that the Israeli side finally upgraded the Oslo second track efforts to the government level. A number of factors inhibiting the Oslo process can be identified. One was that Prime Minister Rabin initially did not place much faith in such a process. Another was that the United States, the host of the formal talks in Washington, was put in the position of an outsider to the Oslo process, and was therefore ambivalent about its value. Third, within the Israeli government itself, Rabin and Peres were not in total agreement in their positions on peace (Rabin having taken direct control of the bilateral negotiations with Washington while Peres was in effect railroaded into handling the multilateral talks). Another likely reason for their difficulty was the fact that the PLO was represented in the Oslo process by the then relatively little-known Ahmed Qorei “Abou Ala,” at the time Yasir Arafat’s advisor on economic affairs (now speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council). After the U.S. administration changed hands in November 1992 and Rabin exiled 415 Hamas-affiliated Palestinians to Lebanon the following month, the peace talks reached an impasse. In an effort to break the stalemate, Israel then shifted, through an agreement between Rabin and Peres, to active pursuit of the second track approach.

Despite raising its involvement in the Oslo process to the government level, Israel set down a number of strict preconditions, including that the second track process would not replace the formal talks in Washington; that Israel would still not allow PLO members to take part in the formal talks; that the formal talks would not address the position of Jerusalem; and that for the time

being Israel would not discuss the issue of settlement zones. On that basis, and with the aim of achieving a provisional agreement, Israel entered into negotiations on the transition to self-rule of Gaza and Jericho first. As a result of these secret second track negotiations, in Oslo on August 13, 1993 an agreement was reached on the establishment of interim Palestinian self-rule in Gaza and Jericho first and on a framework for full-fledged final negotiations. This agreement was passed on to the formal talks in Washington, and Rabin, Peres and Arafat officially concluded the Oslo Agreement at the White House on September 13.

Although a detailed discussion of the content of the Oslo Agreement is beyond the scope of the present article, some aspects of this process have been identified as lessons for diplomatic negotiations. First, whereas formal negotiations are apt to be preceded by protracted discussions of principle and procedure, the second track approach proved to be an extremely effective way to avoid such situations. Second, the existence of any second track process must be known only to the people directly involved; strict secrecy is an essential prerequisite. If the second track’s existence is revealed, it becomes no different from the formal talks, with pressure coming to bear on the participants and arguments from the standpoint of principle and official policy taking center stage. Particularly in the case of the Middle East peace process, factors such as the volatile nature of Israeli popular opinion and the presence of radical fundamentalists on the Palestinian side caused concern for the very lives of the second track participants. Third, such a process requires an effective and indefatigable mediator, a role played in the Oslo process by Norway. Finally, sufficient political strength is required in order to eventually disclose the secret process and turn its results into a formal agreement. In the Oslo case, this strength was ultimately provided by the United States.

Given the paucity of knowledge and understanding in Japan of the Oslo process, the foregoing account of its development is offered as a basis for considering the prospects of the Middle East peace process today.

Israel: “Painful Concessions”

Israel’s political climate is usually regarded as one of constant flux, the balance of power tending to tip easily by just a few percentage points either way. Recently, however, this situation has changed somewhat. Even in April 2002, during the Israeli Army’s “cleanup” campaigns in Jenin, Bethlehem, Rammala, among other trouble spots, public opinion polls showed that almost 70 percent of Israelis were in favor of renewing the peace talks toward a final settlement of Palestine’s status, as long as that put an end to

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the terrorism. Furthermore, nearly 80 percent of Israelis believe that a full-fledged Palestinian state will be created at some time in the future, and more than half support the view that such a state should be established.

At the same time, however, Prime Minister Sharon, who has launched an intense military campaign to tighten security, also enjoys the support of over 70 percent of the nation. Given the number of ordinary Israelis victimized by terrorism—which is said to be, on a per-capita basis, on a par with the scale of casualties of the 11 September attacks—it is hardly surprising that fear of suicide bombings and other forms of

terrorism is strong among Israelis, and that Sharon, staunchly committed to ensuring security, therefore enjoys what by Israel's standards is phenomenal public support. In his policy speeches, Sharon has said that, in addition to strengthened security, the coexistence of Israel and Palestine within such a limited space may require “painful concessions” on the part of the Israeli people. So far enjoying considerable strong public support, this view also suggests an undertone of despair and distrust in the Israeli people's attitude to Palestine. Some Israelis even take the extreme view that, even at the cost of establishing a separate Palestinian state, Israel should sever all contacts with Palestine and, as a nation exclusively of Jews, send all Palestinians within its borders back to Palestine and erect a high wall between the two countries. If the current situation is allowed to continue, that wall may actually be built. As for the Palestinians, it is impossible to know under the circumstances whether or not they truly desire peaceful coexistence with Israel.

Nor is it clear what Prime Minister Sharon means by “painful concessions.” Does he mean removal of the secured Israeli settlements dotted along the West Bank in accordance with his own plans? While Sharon himself speaks of a Palestinian state, in his vision it is to be established in stages over considerable time, long after the Interim Agreement is forged. But just how long is that time frame?

In any case, it seems unlikely that peace talks based on the Clinton proposal of July 2000 will be resumed. Israel's political map currently features a broad alliance, with parts of the left and middle cooperating with the Likud and religious parties of the right. Starting with the next Israeli general election, however, the former system of direct election of the prime minister by popular vote will be replaced by one of proportional representation. This is expected to lead to a reorganization of minority parties and an increase in parliamentary seats for both the Likud Party and the Labor Party. In terms of population share, however, the right has the upper hand, and it is also predicted that the activities of parties representing the 900,000-strong Russian immigrants, the Shas, and other parties backed by religious groups will have a significant effect on the peace process. Amid these developments, and with the so-called “peace camp” lacking strong leadership and showing signs of

internal division, the longer the spiral of Palestinian suicide terrorism and Israeli armed reprisals continues, the further both sides drift from the goal of peace.

Palestine: Prospects of PA Reform

Since the Camp David talks in the summer of 2000, the situation on the Palestinian side has been extremely difficult. Among the largest thorns in the Palestine Authority's (PA) side is the renewed wave of suicide bombings and other acts of terror.

Whereas in the past such terrorist activities were carried out mainly by the Islamic fundamentalist group Hamas, the recent spate has featured increased involvement of other groups, including the Al Aqsa Brigade and the militant Tanzim, a core element in the PLO Fatah faction under Yasser Arafat. Since the Oslo Agreement, as part of increased U.S. support in Palestine the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and other bodies have been helping to strengthen Palestinian security forces, and dialogue has continued with Israel on security issues. However, with twelve security agencies operating at once, the Palestinian security structure is fragmented and extremely inefficient, and Arafat's vague and vacillating policy on terrorism has also been a serious problem.

The United States has responded by insisting that the security reform plan formulated by CIA director George Tenet be put into effect. Arafat, however, has continued to be indifferent to the plan. This situation is partly due to the deteriorating economic and living conditions in Palestinian-controlled territory, but as Khalil Shkaki, director of the Center for Palestine Research and Studies, points out, other obstacles stem from the rise within the PA of next-generation leaders and differences in policy line.

Most of the PA leaders well known in peace negotiations and other prominent areas were among those who, along with Arafat, returned to the occupied areas from Tunisia, and some of them are reportedly corrupt. A number of younger PA officials, most of them from the local area, are using the pretext of PA reform to call for a transfer of power, and as the peace process grows more protracted, a political force is emerging within the PA that is driving toward increased armed struggle. This militant faction believes that the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Southern Lebanon came about as the result of the staunch resistance and organized attacks by the Southern Lebanese Hezbollah. The PA is seeing the emergence of some leaders who support a sustained program of even more devastating attacks to force an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza Strip as well.

The rise of this element in the PA is thought to be directly related to the recent spate of suicide bombings as well as explicit plans to acquire advanced weapons, such as those discovered on the ship *Karine A* in December last year. The *Karine A* incident exposed a large-scale operation in which the ship, purchased in the name of a leading PA official, tried to smuggle a large cache of weapons, including Iranian-made enhanced Katyusha rockets and high-grade C4 explosives, from the island of Qeshm off Iran to Gaza via the Red Sea, towing the weapons underwater in watertight tubes linked together like a

chain of sausages. The ship was seized by an Israeli naval vessel in the Red Sea. Iran has denied involvement in the incident. Had this smuggling operation been successful, it could have led to large-scale acts of terrorism. Some observers believe that Arafat is reluctant to unify and streamline the Palestinian security organization out of deference to this emerging faction of young hardliners in the Fatah.

Another major issue in the reform of the PA is the question of rule of law—or lack of it. The laxity shown by the judicial system when it comes to the arrest, trial, and detention of criminals has become an issue within Palestine itself. There are also problems of inept exercise of the rule of law and accountability in the area of public welfare. When the Palestine Authority was launched, more than thirty government ministries and agencies were established, ministers were appointed, and, in an effort to ease unemployment, a large number of public servants were employed. In addition, as PA president Arafat has established by executive directive a number of administrative councils whose powers overlap those of numerous other government agencies. This has generated confusion in even fundamental aspects of public administration, such as which agency is the competent authority for certain matters and how budgets are to be executed, as well as a general lack of transparency.

PA reform proposals compiled by Palestinian scholars and opinion leaders have been sharply critical on these points. Given the failure even amid economic crisis to make efficient use of limited public resources, and with no sign of improvement in their living conditions, Palestinians have begun to harbor strong misgivings toward the PA leadership, and this presents another major problem for the future. Ordinary Palestinians responded coolly to Arafat's release from his besieged Ramallah headquarters, and calls for reform of the PA have started to spring up with vigor within Palestine. The United States is also pressuring the Authority to carry out reform. The problem is that measures to tighten up all these—by unifying the security forces, full application of the rule of law, ensuring accountability in public administration, and transparency in the flow of funds—are crucial, and all of them will work to curb Arafat's currently extensive discretionary powers as PA president. How he handles this transition will be a key test of his leadership. Unfortunately, however, Arafat appears to have lapsed into the “sell-by-date” approach when it comes to PA reform. This was a critical point of President Bush's speech of June 24.

United States: The Peace Process As a Domestic Issue

The George W. Bush administration is being forced to make some difficult choices regarding the nature and extent of U.S. involvement in the Middle East peace process. At issue are not only foreign policy considerations, but just as worrisome, domestic politics. For some time after Bush was elected, his administration proceeded cautiously and tried to maintain some distance from the Middle East peace issue. In the course of its actions in Afghanistan and the broader war on terrorism since the 11 September attacks, the United States' prime concern in Middle East affairs has come to focus on dealing with

Iraq. In the meantime, Washington has continued its involvement in the Israel-Palestine problem through such measures as sending General Anthony Zinni as U.S. envoy to the Middle East. Since the beginning of 2002, however, with more suicide bombings in Israel and Prime Minister Sharon's order to carry out armed retaliation have made the situation much worse. The United States is left with little choice but to step up its involvement.

Calls for a determined U.S. response have been particularly strong since the announcement of the peace plan proposed by Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz. Relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia became troubled in the wake of the 11 September attacks. However, not only energy but also the future of U.S. involvement in Gulf issues, including the problem of Iraq, are important issues for both Saudi Arabia and the United States. Both recognize the critical importance of restoring friendly relations, as was made clear by the Bush-Abdullah meeting held at President Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas.

Popular opinion, and congressional opinion in the United States since the 11 September attacks, has been overwhelmingly pro-Israel. Many Americans deeply distrust Arafat, who is seen as having done nothing to curb terrorism. As was apparent in President Bush's June 24 speech, little resistance has been seen in American public opinion to the characterization of Israel's armed campaigns in Ramallah, Jenin, and elsewhere as part of the war against terrorism. The Jewish vote in the United States has traditionally gone to the Democrats, but recent reports indicate that Jewish support for the Republican Party is rising. The pro-Israel stance of the Christian right, the conservatives, and other factions central to President Bush's support base is another element strongly affecting the domestic political climate. Policy toward Israel will also be a crucial factor in the race for votes in Florida and other key states in the 2004 election.

On the other hand, a too-close relationship with Israel would stain the United States' relations in the Persian Gulf and narrow its leeway as a peace broker. The situation demands careful navigation between the realities of domestic politics, where support for Israel is a plus, and those of foreign affairs, where a more neutral stance is required. Given also the strong “us vs. them” kind of understanding inherent in the Bush administration, as evident in its references to an “axis of evil,” skilled helmsmanship is required.

One thing is certain: the United States wields unparalleled influence in the Middle East peace process and, under both Democrat and Republican administrations, Washington has worked toward and achieved results commensurate with that central role. As one senior State Department official aptly put it, only the United States can claim a Middle East peace effort

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involving a CIA director sent to the troubled region itself, a secretary of state engaged in shuttle diplomacy, and a president being directly and actively involved as a party to the negotiations.

Japan: A Results-oriented Approach

Turning to Japan's part in resolving the problems in the Middle East problem, we must recognize first of all that this country's record of involvement in the peace process is spotty, at best. The seeds of strife in Palestine were sown when new Jewish settlements began forming there after World War I, the so-called "war to end all wars." Japan, however, had nothing to do with the Treaty of Sevres and the San Remo Conference, the main source of those seeds.

Nor was Japan, as an enemy nation, privy to the dialogue on the Palestine problem that took place among Allied powers at the conclusion of World War II. At the time of the 1947 U.N. resolution on the division of Palestine, Japan was not yet a member of the United Nations. Then came the Arab-Israeli War of 1948–49, when the state of Israel was founded, but Japan, which was struggling just to feed its own people in the aftermath of the Pacific War, hardly noticed the conflict. Although Japan and Israel established diplomatic relations in 1952, already fifty years ago, both sides were mainly interested in international recognition; it is difficult to imagine that either country was particularly concerned at the time with how to develop their bilateral relationship thereafter.

Japan gained its first real sense of the problems surrounding the Middle East peace process with the Arab-Israeli War of 1973. Even then, however, it registered the problem in terms of the Arab oil strategy, or "Arab boycott." Arguably, then, Japan's first practical involvement in "Middle East peace" was occasioned by the Gulf War, and came in the form of participation in the subsequent multilateral Middle East peace negotiations. Even then, Japan's involvement was prompted by mounting expectations among the Japanese public that, as a country which contributed some thirteen billion dollars to the Gulf War effort, it could hardly be left out of the peace process that began in Madrid. Questions concerning the Middle East strategy and the Middle

East peace process were thus of secondary importance for Japan. The real objective of its efforts was not securing peace in the Middle East per se, but securing its own position in the international community.

When Japan indicated its wish to take part in the multilateral negotiations proposed by the United States, the Americans were somewhat taken aback. The U.S. secretary of state at the time, James Baker, responded by stating that, while he understood the intentions and political context behind Japan's desire to take part in the dialogue, he wanted Japan to specify what it could do to promote peace in the Middle East,

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adding that it would not be acceptable for Japan to be a mere "bench-warmer" at the talks.

Debate within Japan's foreign ministry took a similar tone on the question of what concrete contribution Japan could hope to make. Some argued that Japan's participation in the multilateral peace process would effectively sandwich the country between U.S.-backed Israel on the one hand and the Arab powers on the other, and being in such a position would undermine its post-Gulf War efforts to strengthen relations with Arab countries. However, after further consultations with the United States, it was decided that Japan would chair the program's environmental issues group and serve as co-chair of the water resources issues group presided over by the United States. In the Middle East, water resources are closely bound up with security, while environmental issues tend not to be such macro-level problems as global warming as they are very immediate aspects of daily living, particularly water-related issues such as waste disposal and sewerage treatment.

This proved to be the correct path for Japan to take in entering the Middle East peace process. It allowed the emergence of a favorable image of Japan using its economic and technological strength to help Palestinians deal with their most immediate problems. Furthermore, even in comparison with the contributions of European countries, Japan's activities were tangible. Both the Israeli and Arab sides roundly applauded Japan's performance.

Because most ordinary Palestinians see a considerable gap between their own living standards and those of Israelis, it is all the more important for Palestinians to believe in the promise that the Middle East peace process will result in concrete improvement in their living conditions. Otherwise they will have little incentive to work toward peace. Japan's part in the multilateral peace process therefore not only represented a breakthrough in its own efforts to contribute to Middle East peace but also indicated the direction of its own stance for the future.

From now on, however, support for Palestine must go beyond the problems of waste disposal and water. Japan's next step is to clearly conceptualize how it can assist the emerging state of Palestine in identifying its own needs and drawing up its own blueprint to meet those needs, and how it can help to put that plan into practice. The task of reforming the Palestinian Authority, in particular, is less a matter of "hard" infrastructure than of "soft" political infrastructure, or politics itself. Although this is a difficult dimension of the overall problem, it is one in which Japan needs to be involved. It is often pointed out that Japan had the advantage of "clean hands," that is, no history of colonialism in the Middle East. It was in a good position to play this kind of role. Japan should keep in mind, however, the other side of that coin: as a country whose involvement in the region has been minimal throughout most of its history, it still lacks much of the knowledge required for effective assistance in stabilizing and strengthening the region's political infrastructure.

Many people also point out how important political stability in the Middle East is for Japan, particularly in the area of energy. However, unlike the case of the United States and some European countries with significant Muslim populations or histories of colonialism in the Middle East, involvement in the

Middle East peace process is unlikely to become a major issue in Japan's domestic politics. On the other hand, it also means that no Japanese government is likely to enjoy political support for all-out commitment to this thorny problem. This aspect must also be borne in mind when considering Japan's involvement in the Middle East peace process.

Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres has remarked recently that they had forged ahead with the peace process in search of a light at the end of the tunnel, but that, undermined by the current state of affairs, the tunnel itself was beginning to cave in. That view is understandable. Looking at the peace process over the past decade as a long, arduous path through a tunnel, there certainly was at one time a faint light of hope in the form of the Oslo Agreements, but the light has vanished for now and the path has turned back into a tunnel in danger of imminent collapse.

At the same time, however, the prevailing opinion both in the international community, including the United States, and in Israel is that it is only a matter of time before an independent Palestinian state is created. On the Arab side, a similar awareness is growing that Palestine and neighboring Arab countries must learn to live in peaceful coexistence with Israel, as envisioned in Crown Prince Abdullah's peace plan. As long as efforts continue in repairing the crumbling tunnel, a way out will be found. Japan is among the nations with the economic and technological capabilities needed to at least shore up the tunnel.

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