



Mitchell's Mission Impossible

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Senator George Mitchell, US Special Envoy to the Middle East, has an impossible task. American clout in the region has waned over the years, and Mitchell faces a situation where a US president advocates a quick end to the conflict, an Israeli prime minister insists on negotiations without preconditions, and a Palestinian society lacks a united leadership – fragmented by Abbas' rule in the West Bank and Hamas' rule in Gaza. Mitchell, and with him a large part of the international community, fail to understand that the ethnic conflict being waged in the Holy Land will end only when the parties tire. So far, Israelis and Palestinians still have energy to fight for what is important to them.

The appointment of Senator George Mitchell as special envoy to the Middle East in January 2009 elicited great expectations for progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track, particularly since the new American president, Barack Obama, eloquently communicated his intent to renew peace negotiations and end them successfully within his first term in office. After nine months and many trips to the Middle East, a plethora of meetings with the leaders in the region and even an Obama-Netanyahu-Abbas summit in New York last month, Senator Mitchell seems unable to report success to his boss.

There are several reasons for this outcome, some conjectural and some structural. First, Obama's behavior has not been helpful. He has insisted on a comprehensive settlement freeze, which the Palestinians turned into a precondition for sitting at the negotiating table. So far it has backfired, indicating Washington's limitations in imposing its will on Jerusalem, as well

as the diplomatic acumen of Netanyahu's government. Moreover, the arm-twisting to persuade Abbas to come to the New York summit further undermined the position of the weak Palestinian leader. On top of this, Washington rightly demanded that the Palestinian Authority defer the presentation of the infamous Goldstone report to UN forums. Yet Abbas' acquiescence in the American demand exposed him to the criticism of Hamas, the main competitor in Palestinian politics. All this hampered the PA's flexibility toward Israel and hindered the return to negotiations.

Second, in Israel, the Netanyahu government advocated a return to negotiations without preconditions – *prima facie*, a very reasonable position. Moreover, following Netanyahu's May 2009 diplomatic address at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University, over 70 percent of Israelis, a very high figure, endorsed his policies on the Palestinian issue. This political feat made Israel less vulnerable to outside pressure. Furthermore, Israel gained American promises to secure Arab gestures as a *quid pro quo* for its concessions. Washington was unable to deliver, indicating again the limits of American clout in the region.

Poor Mitchell was sent into diplomatic battle when most of the region was quite impressed with Obama's rhetoric but was not convinced that words would be followed by deeds. Unfortunately, the heyday of American power and influence in the Middle East is over. When American diplomacy is not backed by "hard" power, the "soft" power extolled nowadays by Washington carries only little weight with the realpolitik-oriented Middle Eastern elites. Most capitals of the region regard Obama as weak. This does not augur well for Mitchell, as even the weak Palestinians are able to say "no."

The truth is that even a much stronger America cannot impose peace agreements. In 1991, the tough Secretary of State James Baker was successful in convening the Madrid conference, but the 1993 Israeli-Palestinian Oslo agreement and the 1994 Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty were the result of bilateral interactions with no American input. Similarly, Anwar Sadat decided to go to Jerusalem in 1977 when President Carter wanted him to fly to Geneva instead for an international peace conference. Outsiders have limited ability to induce change in how Middle Easterners conduct their business, as recent American experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan indicate.

American diplomacy can hardly make a dent in the schism within Palestinian society that is the main stumbling block for progress in peace-making. As long as Islamist Hamas has a powerful grip on the Palestinian ethos and Palestinian aspirations, and as long as its ruthless rule over Gaza continues, Palestinian politics are hostage to the extremists and are unable to move

toward an historic compromise with the Jewish-Zionist national movement. Mitchell cannot even prevent a draft of a Hamas-Fatah reconciliation document that does not conform to Quartet demands (renounce violence, recognize Israel and respect past agreements).

The final obstacle for Mitchell is the nature of his mandate – the pursuit of an outdated paradigm, the two-state solution. Unfortunately, the desired outcome of the Oslo process, partition of the Land of Israel into two states – Jewish and Palestinian – was not achieved and this predicament is unlikely to change any time soon. The Palestinians failed the main test of statehood: monopoly over the use of force. They allowed armed militias to erode law and order in the areas under their control. This culminated in the bloody Hamas takeover of Gaza. Even Hamas in Gaza failed to acquire a monopoly over the use of force: witness the existence of the armed groups Islamic Jihad, elements of al-Qaeda and certain clans. As noted, Palestinian society, be it in the West Bank or Gaza, is not entertaining reconciliation with the Jews. The "shaheed" (martyr) is still the role model in the Palestinian media and education system.

Mitchell, and with him a large part of the international community, fail to understand that the ethnic conflict being waged in the Holy Land will end only when the parties tire. So far, Israelis and Palestinians still have energy to fight for what is important to them.

Therefore, what is needed is a new policy paradigm. It is high-time to consider a return to the status quo ante of pre-1967. Jordan and Egypt are responsible states at peace with Israel that successfully ruled over the Palestinians. They should be induced to share responsibility for regional stability. The Palestinian potential for regional mischief is not only Israel's problem.

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