The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
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With One Sentence Japan Could Set the Stage for an Israeli-Palestinian Peace

John McGlynn

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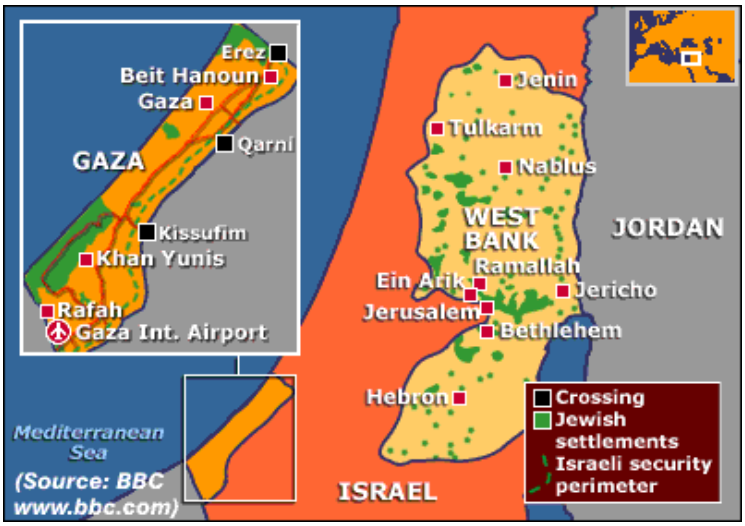
What is that sentence?

"We believe that the remarks of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert as recently told to an Israeli newspaper could serve as the basis for immediately starting a new set of realistic negotiations aimed at achieving a just and lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians."

What did Olmert say?

The September 29 International Middle East Media Center (IMEMC) News provides this summary:

"Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert gave a lengthy interview to the Israeli Newspaper, Yedioth Ahronoth, in which he said that Israel must withdraw from most of the Occupied Palestinian Territories and compensate the Palestinians for the remainder of the Israeli-occupied land, in addition to trying to achieve a peace agreement with Syria."



Map of Israel showing Palestinian territories and lines of demarcation

IMEMC News and the September 29 Inter Press Service (IPS) provide these Olmert quotes from the interview:

> -- "The aim of peace is to draw, for the first time, clear borders between us and the Palestinians, borders recognized by the whole world and set by official international resolutions" and " we should act within the international community, and not unilaterally."
>
> -- "In the end we will have to withdraw from the lion's share of the territories. [...] What I'm saying to you now has not been said by any Israeli leader before me. The time has come to say these things. The time has come to put them on the table."

In addition, on September 30 Haaretz, an Israel newspaper, reported that in regard to negotiations with Syria Olmert said: "First and foremost, we must make a decision. I'd like to see if there is one serious person in the State of Israel who believes it is possible to make peace with the Syrians without eventually giving up the Golan Heights" and "It is true that an agreement with Syria comes with danger. Those who want to act with zero danger should move to Switzerland."

What an opportunity these words present. Think of the possibilities if a major country like Japan were to publicly and vigorously endorse them.

The world is tired of the wars in the Middle East. Many people want the kind of big changes presidential candidates Barack Obama and John McCain promise the American public but rarely spell out. The "coalition of the willing" is almost down to one in Iraq and disenchantment with US-led NATO military actions in Afghanistan is growing in Europe.

In the US, the majority of Americans think the Iraq war was a mistake, want peace between the Israelis and Palestinians and prefer diplomacy over military action in settling any differences with Iran. Under the bailout of Wall St. and the loss of jobs and shuttering of mortgaged homes on Main Street, Americans are starting to ask fundamental questions about the concentration of political, economic and financial power in the hands of big business and their friends in Washington.

If the mood on Main Street intensifies, the demand for sweeping change could become irresistible. How that will affect dominant US policies toward the Middle East is anybody's guess, but it could create new openings for peace through which other countries could step.

In stating that Israel has to withdraw from occupied Palestinian territories and work with the international community, Olmert appears to be proposing that Israel accept the internationally supported two-state solution (supported also as polls show by the majority of Americans -- and American Jews -- Palestinians and Israelis).

Olmert's words alone, spoken as he prepares to hand power to a new Prime Minister, will change nothing. He needs the assistance of a powerful and diplomatically experienced country if Israel is to engage in meaningful peace negotiations with the Palestinians. Japan's hosting of G8 summits, the Kyoto conference on climate change and in the last decade a series of Israeli-Palestinian working-level and leadership meetings amply demonstrate it has the diplomatic credibility and machinery to help get things moving in the right direction.

But Japan needs to act quickly. Olmert is a lame duck. The interview with Yedioth Ahronoth came hours after he submitted his resignation because of allegations that as Jerusalem's mayor and Israel's industry minister he received cash gifts from a US businessman. For the next several weeks or a month, he remains interim prime minister until Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, elected to replace Olmert as leader of the Kadima Party, can put together a new government. Whether as prime minister Livni will continue Israeli's brutal occupation of Palestinian lands is unknown.

If Livni is unable to form a government in the coming weeks Israel will have to hold elections. Rightwing opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu recently told the Jerusalem Post that if he became prime minister he would do nothing to stop further illegal land grabs of Palestinian lands in the West Bank by Israeli settlers.

In a recent essay, Israeli analyst and former Knesset member Uri Avnery wonders whether a "definite fascist fringe at the margin of Israel's political society" and "concentrated in the 'ideological' settlements" may jeopardize Israel's democracy. He sees fascism "growing in the flowerbed that produced the various religious-nationalist underground groups of the past" who targeted both Palestinians and Israelis for violence and assassination (examples: the bombing of Muslim shrines, attempted killings of Palestinian mayors and the murder of Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin).

The world has multiple good reasons to worry about nuclear weapons proliferation. If Avnery's anxiety ever turns into reality, surely Israel's secret cache of nuclear weapons in the hands of an openly fascist government would rank at the top of the list of global proliferation concerns.

The quickest way to negotiate an Israeli-Palestinian peace is for the US to declare support for Olmert's words and then get to work diplomatically. But the track record of US diplomacy, notably under the Bush II and Clinton administrations, is not encouraging. And nothing positive will happen under a McCain presidency likely to be dominated by the usual right-wing fringe discouraging all attempts at peace. Nor under a President Obama, who in a June 2008 speech to the powerful pro-Israeli lobby AIPAC promised "$30 billion in assistance to Israel over the next decade" and chose only to mention Israeli deaths and denounce the Palestinian's elected government of Hamas.

Last June Stephen Zunes, a US foreign policy analyst, wrote: "Though a public opinion poll published in the leading Israeli newspaper Haaretz showed that 64% of the Israeli population support direct negotiations between Israel and Hamas (while only 28% expressed opposition), Obama has chosen to side with the right-wing minority in opposing any such talks."

Moreover, after two debates by the candidates for president and vice-president of the two major US political parties, it's clear that the fundamental US policy for the Middle East is "the war goes on" (to quote Middle East correspondent Robert Fisk from Joan Littlewood's Oh! What a Lovely War). The four candidates voiced their concern for Israel's safety but had no word for the Palestinians.

The desperate plight of the Palestinians under occupation has been well documented in numerous studies by United Nations agencies and human rights organizations. For example, a May 2008 joint report by three UN agencies, the World Food Programme, the Food and Agriculture Organization and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, declared the food situation "especially desperate" for the Palestinians in Gaza, who spend 66% of their income on food. While serving as UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan demanded that Israel ends its "illegal occupation" of lands captured in the 1967 Middle East war. Palestinians suffer some of the harshest levels of hunger and unemployment in the world, a situation directly traceable to Israel's military occupation.

What about the EU? In particular, the Big 3 of Germany, France and Great Britain could easily offer a public endorsement of Olmert's words and help get serious negotiations underway. France, for example, has recently pursued some independent diplomacy with Syria, an unofficial fourth member of the "axis of evil" in the eyes of the Bush administration and a key player in any Middle East settlement. Polls repeatedly indicate that the citizens of the EU-member countries favor a diplomatic approach to all Middle East conflicts.

But the EU political leadership is likely to stick to its decades-old practice of following the US (and Israeli) lead. That includes maintaining the economic blockade of Gaza, turning a blind eye to Israeli encroachment on Palestinian lands, and steadily notching up sanctions against Iran for pursuing a civilian nuclear program the IAEA has questioned but repeatedly found to be fully compliant with the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Other major powers, such as China or India? Possibilities, but each in its own way is trying to manage the growth of a rising global status in military and economic affairs without disturbing generally friendly relations with Washington. For the moment, displeasing the US by taking the lead on a Middle East problem is too great a risk.

Why Japan? Well, why then not Japan? It's a respected economic superpower, has a tarnished but still serviceable international reputation for promoting peace and diplomacy, and its government and business representatives are generally welcomed throughout the Middle East. If neither the US nor the EU Big 3 are likely to step forward, the opportunity arises for a nation seeking a permanent UN Security Council position to step forward to work for peace in the Middle East.

But there are other reasons why Japan might be a good choice. The biggest reason is that Japan has earned the right to go its own way from the US on Middle East policy. Japan has paid substantial political dues to Washington by serving as a loyal partner in the US-led war on terror and dispatching the SDF to Iraq and MSDF ships to refuel US and coalition ships patrolling the Persian gulf. It has also spent billions on bilateral missile defense arrangements, hosted large US military bases since the end of World War II and generally sided with the US on most of the major issues taken up by international bodies (the UN, IAEA, etc.).

As mentioned, Japan has years of experience working with Palestinian and Israeli leaders and diplomats. Along the way, it has won the trust of the Palestinians by helping to fund social welfare and public works projects in the occupied territories (unfortunately, Japan currently supports the US-Israeli-EU economic blockade of Gaza).

Promoting peace in the Middle East obviously has a bearing on Japan's energy security, which depends heavily on an uninterrupted supply of natural gas and oil imports from the region.

Japanese oil tanker

And because the US-led war on terror in the Middle East has started to spill into Pakistan, this could bring the question of the safety of Pakistan's nuclear weapons arsenal closer to Japan's doorstep. If Pakistan breaks apart in response to political and military pressure from the US and armed pressure and resistance from domestic religious, nationalist or anti-US forces, nearby neighbors China and India, along with the US as the global superpower, may feel forced to seize control of Pakistan's nuclear weapons. One way or another Japan would likely find itself drawn in, either in response to China's actions or because of alliance demands from the US. A decision now by Japan to get directly involved in encouraging Israeli-Palestinian (and perhaps Israeli-Syria) negotiations that have any realistic chance of success could spark a peace counteroffensive in the Middle East that might in turn relieve some of the pressure on Pakistan or give Japan credibility to mediate with warring domestic factions in Pakistan in the event of a loose nukes problem.

Japan's biggest card is that if it acted now it could work with a still-sitting Israeli prime minister who appears ready to discard years of obstructionism by previous governments and take a sensible approach on surrendering land and other issues. Japan and Israel working together at this time on the basis of Olmert's statements also becomes a tactical opportunity to defuse the strongest opposition to a peaceful settlement, which would not necessarily come from inside Israel but rather from AIPAC and other pro-Israeli rightwing groups in the US, who would find it difficult to simultaneously oppose a sitting Israeli prime minister and a major US ally.

Another consideration is Japan's open campaign in recent years for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Article 1 of the UN charter states that the UN is purposed "To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, [...] and to bring about by peaceful means, [...] adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace."

Article 24 stipulates that "In order to ensure prompt and effective action by the United Nations, its Members confer on the Security Council primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security."

There is no better way for Japan to demonstrate it is living up to the Charter and is therefore a worthy candidate for a permanent Security Council seat than by seizing the opportunity now to word hard on converting Olmert's words into a negotiations framework for a final and just peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

As a lame duck Olmert probably cannot get much done on his own. But with Japan's enthusiastic backing and, presumably, support from much of the international community enough momentum could be generated for Israel's next prime minister, which in the weeks to come will probably be Tzipi Livni, to carry forward with negotiations based on an established Olmert-Japan framework.

It may be sheer fantasy to expect that Japan acting alone can do anything to help arrange peace between Israel and Palestinians or end any of the other violent conflicts in the Middle East. But political circumstances around the world are changing. More than most countries, Japan has the experience and the resources to react to these changes.

In the end the words at the beginning of the constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), an organization created immediately after World War II to facilitate educational, scientific and cultural projects in order to promote international respect for justice, the rule of law and the human rights proclaimed in the UN Charter, should be remembered: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed."

Calling on those in Japan who have a mind to be defenders of peace: The opportunity presented by Olmert awaits. But he needs some strong assistance. Maybe you could step forward?

John McGlynn is a Tokyo-based independent foreign policy and financial analyst. This is a revised version of an article that appeared in the Shingetsu Newsletter on October 4, 2008. Posted at Japan Focus on October 6, 2008.

See also Uri Avnery, "Olmert's Final Divorce From 'All of Eretz Israel. '"

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