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## **ASYMMETRY NEEDS TO BE ADDRESSED**

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It was not surprising that the long-awaited Palestinian-Israeli summit didn't produce results. Instead of the Sharon-Abbas meeting dealing with the many issues that badly need answers, it appears to have been a one-sided meeting. Reports coming out of that meeting talk about Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon using it to lash out against the Palestinian leader because of the security situation. An Israeli report quoted the Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas as asking Sharon to help him and Sharon scolding him for that request, telling him that people might actually believe that he is weak.

Those interested in finding a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict must recognize the basic lack of symmetry in this protracted conflict. While Israel occupied the land, controls borders (within and without Palestine), has a powerful military, political and financial advantage and has the overwhelming support of the political establishment (from both parties) in the United States, Palestinian's is mostly a negative power, namely the power to say no.

With such a huge disadvantage, the conflict can't be solved — as Americans have often suggested — simply by getting the conflicting parties to sit down and talk. If the sides do sit down, as has happened during the recent summit, one side uses the occasion to lecture the other side.

As a result of this asymmetry the choices are simple. The strong side has to voluntarily make compromises, the weak side has to accept dictates of the strong or something must be done to correct this huge lack of symmetry.

One other option is simply to wait until the weak side gets stronger. Palestinians have often debated this particular issue and have come up with a variety of options, but without much success. At one time, Palestinians were hoping that Arab countries can be brought into the equation to help fix the lack of symmetry. But this proved to be useless as it became clear that Arab leaders were unwilling to do anything more than simply give lip service to the Palestinian cause. Once they gave up on an effective role of fellow Arabs, radical groups opted for a violent solution. Terror, as the weapon of the weak, was seen as a legitimate way to force the strong side to respond. Others have taken the political track. This began with the major compromise made by the PLO and Yasser Arafat after the first Intifada when, in 1998, the Palestinian National Council made a major compromise regarding its historic position by accepting the two-state solution.

The Oslo process, that was supposed to translate this into a political reality, failed, in large part because of the refusal of the strong party to make the needed compromises. Ultimately, this track ended with the assassination by an Israeli Jew of the Israeli prime minister, followed by the election of Benjamin Netanyahu.

Frustrated Palestinian radical groups disappointed with Ehud Barak's offer, which included substantial Palestinian concessions on the two-state solution (especially on Jerusalem and recognizing the refugee problem), decided again to use force.

The idea was that the Israeli arrogant offer came from their feeling of superiority and the Palestinian weakness. Radical groups thought that violence would force the Israelis to offer a more reasonable and fair compromise. That also failed, but with the Abbas' election, the majority of Palestinians voted for a return to the political track to produce the desired results. Six months after Abu Mazen's election, very little has happened on the ground. Palestinian lives have not improved, checkpoints have not been reduced, travel restrictions within Palestinian cities has not been eased and the 8,000 prisoners (many of them prisoners of conscience being held without charge or trial) continue to suffer in Israeli jails, in contravention of international humanitarian laws.

The unilateral Israeli decision to withdraw from Gaza is a perfect example of this asymmetry, affecting not only the Palestinians but the entire international community which has been forced to revise its own roadmap to fit this unilateral Israeli decision.

The post-summit frustrations will continue for as long as third parties do not get involved, making an effort to correct this crystal clear asymmetry that has made the chance of a Middle East breakthrough so elusive. Third parties, especially the US, have a strong reason to be involved.

Whether they will admit it or not, they have been a source of the conflict by helping create this asymmetry through financial, military and political support to one side at the expense of the other. Now that the US priorities have placed the issue of democracy and human rights in the Arab world, as well as the conflict in Iraq, on top of its priorities, a concerted US effort is essential.

Source: Jordan Times, Opinion (Jordan)