

Leon T. Hadar

Journalist and foreign affairs analyst

Posted: October 28, 2009 12:19 PM

The Shape of Things to Come: War before Peace in the Mideast

Not unlike the local weatherman who was being accused by Larry David in an episode of "Curb Your Enthusiasm" of falsely forecasting rain in order to clear the golf course, political analysts and financial experts have been faulted for allegedly elevating wishful thinking or biased opinion to the status of reliable forecasts in an effort to promote specific personal or institutional agendas; the Republican strategist forecasting his party's election victory is hoping to influence the outcome of the vote or the investment analyst hyping a favorite company to raise the value of its stock.

So for the record: my predictions about what's going to happen in the Middle East don't reflect any personal interest or political agenda. In fact, as someone who has been committed to bringing an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to reaching peace in the Middle East, the notion that all these wonderful things are not going to happen anytime soon runs contrary to my own wishful thinking.

But as someone who has been a proud member of the Reality-Based Community I need to maintain a certain consistency when it comes to the Middle East. During the debate over the Iraq War, I challenged the notion advanced by neoconservative ideologues that Iraq could be transformed into a liberal democracy as a first step towards remaking the Middle East, and predicted that the Freedom Agenda would produce a big mess in the region. So as President Barack Obama is creating new expectations about his plans to re-energize the peace process and help resolve the clash between Jews and Arabs in the Promised Land, I wish I had faith in his ability to deliver it. But as a hard-core Realpolitik type I need to face reality and to conclude that Obama's peace-processing has reached a dead-end, and that the next round of diplomacy in the Middle East diplomacy would come only after the next round of war in the region.

Indeed, the two most dramatic and serious efforts to make peace between Arabs and Israelis had transpired only after devastating military confrontations demonstrated that the costs of maintaining the diplomatic status-quo were not sustainable. Hence, while American diplomacy helped advance the Egyptian-Israeli peace process, beginning with the disengagement agreement of 1974 and 1975 and culminating in the Camp David Accord of 1978, it was the 1973 Middle East War that opened this road to peace. And it was the First Palestinian Intifadah or uprising (1987-93) that led directly to the 1993 Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

In the aftermath of the electoral victory of Obama, I had experienced an acute case of foreign policy schizophrenia. The Realpolitik side of my persona remained skeptical about the new president's ability to revive the dormant Israeli-Palestinian peace process. I recalled that in 2000, when Washington had embarked on its last Mideast peace processing, the United States was at the apex of international power in a unipolar world, and the Israelis and the Palestinians were led by strong and more moderate leaderships than today. But even at that time, the Clinton Administration could not significantly advance Israeli-Palestinian. Hence, there was little reason to expect that Obama, leading an overstretched military and an economy in recession, would become an effective peacemaker in 2009.

But applying Samuel Johnson's maxim about a second marriage, that it was "the triumph of hope over experience," hope seemed to prevail in my thinking. It was possible that using use his charismatic and cosmopolitan persona, including his quasi-Muslim roots, Obama would succeed in re-energizing U.S. diplomatic influence in the Middle East and be in position to bring about Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation.

Ten months into the new administration it seems that notwithstanding his commitment to resolving the conflict, Obama is finding it close to impossible to move toward an agreement at a time of weak political leadership on both sides and when there is no sign of the narrowing of the gap between the two national communities over the core existential issues that have separated them, such as the fate of Jerusalem and of the "right of return" of the 1947 Palestinian refugees. In reality, the Obama Administration has failed to produce the first scene in the movie in which the Israelis were supposed to end the buildup of new Jewish settlements and the Saudis were expected to respond with "gestures" to the Israelis.

I'm familiar with the counter-arguments. Obama needs to stand-up to the nationalist Israeli government and its supporters in Washington. But let's face it. That's not going to happen any time soon as Obama continues to confront major domestic (health care; unemployment) and foreign (Afghanistan; Iraq) challenges and is not ready to start a costly battle on a new political front even if the guys in J Street are going to fight on his side.

So we are back in square one -- the status-quo -- where the road to Jerusalem seems to be blocked. But we've been there before. In the aftermath of the Israeli victory in the 1967 Middle East War, Israelis governments were operating under the

assumption that, "It's better to have war with us having Sinai than peace without Sinai," as Israel's legendary military figure Moshe Dayan put it. By launching the 1973 War, the late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat challenged the status-quo and helped transform Israeli strategic calculations. The Palestinian uprising had also shaken-up the status-quo and demonstrated to the Israelis that the long-term occupation of the Palestinian territories ceased to be a realistic proposition.

Hence, expect the current status-quo in the Middle East to be disturbed -- sooner rather than later. Another Palestinian uprising, a new Israeli-Hizbollah war, a confrontation between Israel and Iran -- or a combination of all the above -- would then create the conditions for the next round of Middle East diplomacy. I do hope that Obama will prove me wrong. But I'm afraid that once again, experience is going to triumph over hope.