

Peace talks begin in the Middle East

By Alexandra Miller
STAFF WRITER

"By being here today, you each have taken an important step toward freeing your peoples from the shackles of a history we cannot change and moving toward a future of peace and dignity that only you can create," said Hillary Clinton, regarding the Sept. 2 peace talks between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Washington, D.C.

The results thus far are encouraging. The two sides agreed to meet in Egypt in two weeks following their meeting on Sept. 2. They will meet again in Washington, D.C. on Sept. 26 to continue discussing the status of Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees, Israeli settlements, and Israeli security.

Each issue is a potential obstacle for peace, each issue is complicated by a history of conflict, hostility, and combat and each issue becomes more desperate with every failed attempt at peace.

"I think that both sides are fed-up, generations have grown up with 'the conflict,'" said Benjamin Macdonald, a senior who has traveled in the Middle East. "There are a lot of things at play here, beyond the politics and land disputes there are emotional issues that will take a lot of time to tackle."

The issues are sensitive and complex, leaving tensions high. For now, the world awaits tangible evidence that these talks may produce results. Peace talks have been attempted numerous times including the Camp David Accords in 1978, the Oslo Accord in 1993, Camp David in 2000, and the Road Map and Geneva accords, both in 2003. When questioned why these accords failed, Rabbi Fred Guttman of Temple Emmanuel in Greensboro was frank.

"We can sit here and say this is how Oslo was violated by Palestinians or Israelis," said Guttman. "The majority of violations of Oslo from my narratives were done by the Palestinians. The Palestinians are going to say from their narratives it was the Israelis."

Despite the long, complicated record of peace attempts, President Barack Obama has stipulated that the peace talks must be completed in one year. Resolving issues that have plagued the Middle East for decades, in a mere 12 months, seems unlikely to many.

"I do feel that the President's desire to wrap these up in a year is unrealistic," said Guttman. "However, as long as progress is being made, that deadline is irrelevant."

However, the short and strict single year may prove to be advantageous. According to Associate Professor of Political Science Ken Gilmore, this rigid goal will diminish opportunities for those threatening the peace process.

According to Max Carter, director of the Friends Center/campus ministry coordinator of Guilford, each side may not be able to make the sacrifices necessary to solidify a peace agreement.

"Most people believe this can be worked through, if there is compromise on both sides," Carter said. "Both sides will have to make tough decisions."

A justified skepticism exists for many.

"I can understand why people are less than optimistic about the peace talks," said Gilmore. "I am cautiously optimistic that something is going to happen. (Everyone) may not get a comprehensive deal or hit a homerun, like a two-state solution. But I think they can get a partial deal, and I think that would be better than nothing."

Guttman remains skeptical, in large part, because of extremists on both sides.

"I am afraid of the people opposed to peace talks that will commit violent acts to undermine the peace process," Guttman said. "(This includes) Hamas and the ultra-right wing Israeli settlers."

Currently, the peace talks appear stable. Netanyahu did not turn his back after four Israelis were murdered by Hamas on Tuesday. Similarly, Abbas condemned the murders and did not walk away when Israeli settlers began new construction. Though still fragile and in the earliest stages of development, the peace discussions are beginning to breathe.

Hopefully, the shared desire for peace will outweigh entrenched perspectives that have continued to perpetuate a bloody status quo.

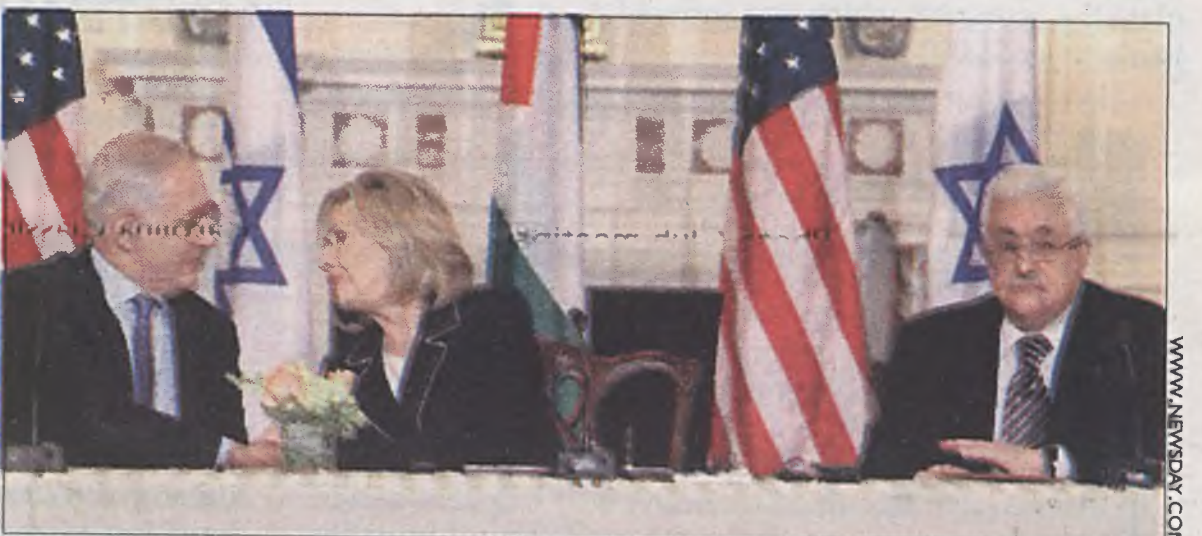
"I believe that both the Palestinian and Israeli government leaders are going to have to put aside parts of their personal platforms and the platforms of the party they are representing," said senior Kira Borman, a member of Hillel. "They will have to focus purely on what is best for their people and their

people's future for any sort of solution to be obtainable."

The peace talks are just a step, but they are a step in the right direction. "Palestinians just want a normal life," said Carter. "And Israelis do too. That's what may finally drive a peace accord."



(Above) U.S. President **Barack Obama** walks with Israeli Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu**, and Palestinian President **Mahmoud Abbas**.
(Below) Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and Palestinian President Abbas with Secretary of State **Hillary Clinton**.



KENYA

New constitution aims to balance power, maintain stability

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have been endemic due to government corruption.

The changes and proposals outlined in the document are the result of a long campaign by Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki and Prime Minister Raila Odinga. Their campaign was focused on introducing reforms in light of the highly contentious 2007 presidential election.

The election, which many claimed was rigged in favor of Kibaki, resulted in widespread violence. The unrest shocked the international community, considering that Kenya has generally been viewed as relatively stable compared to its East African neighbors.

According to Assistant Professor of History Joy Coates, who specializes in Kenyan studies, "Kenya has

a history of fraudulent elections, but it has generally tried to be a model for other African nations."

Since gaining its independence from Britain in 1963, Kenya has side-stepped many of the macabre episodes that have affected neighboring countries like Uganda and Rwanda.

However, in the past, citizens and officials have viewed Kenyan democracy with little respect.

Multi-party elections were banned until 1994, and since then, decision-making abilities have remained highly monopolized by the executive branch of government. Additionally, religious and ethnic tensions between Kenya's Christian majority and Muslim minority and between the Kikuyu, Luo, and other Kenyan tribes continue to create divisions in the coun-

try with political ramifications.

Amid the frustration and anger that many Kenyans have felt since the 2007 elections, there has been a general desire to regain Kenya's status as a model of stability.

Some feel the political leadership in Kenya has attempted to tap into these feelings by proposing the new constitution as a way to regain the trust of Kenyans.

According to Coates, "Kenyans had lost hope in their government, and this constitution seems to be a way to appease people."

Many Kenyans felt that the 1963 constitution, a relic of the colonial era, gave overreaching authority to the presidency and did not sufficiently address issues of land-grabbing.

However, there remain controversial parts of the new constitution

which not all feel will help stabilize Kenya.

Despite approved measures to create more checks and balances, certain clauses in the constitution have provoked concerns about a possible resurgence of religious tensions.

Some Christian leaders feel that the provisions allowing the use of Islamic courts are discriminatory. Many in Kenya's evangelical community also claim that the constitution allows for loopholes in Kenya's ban on abortions.

Evangelical voters provided the base for the 33 percent voting against the referendum.

While there is some apprehension among certain groups in Kenya, there is a general feeling of optimism in the country, with hopes that the new constitution will create

greater transparency in government and allow for social and economic mobility.

Several campaign posters encouraging a "yes" vote featured Obama's picture alongside those of Kibaki and Odinga, suggesting that the presence of a Kenyan-descent president in the United States has created a sense of solidarity within the country, and inspired new hope for positive change.

"Kenyans are justifiably proud to have one of their people as the president of the U.S.," Coates said.

In light of the genocide and corruption that still plague other countries in East Africa, there is a sense of hope that Kenya's efforts to work towards democracy will not only improve the political situation there, but also act as a catalyst for change in the region.