

## **At the crossroads: darkness at noon, for better or worse**

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The present Middle East crisis could unfold in one of two directions: all-out war or gradual appeasement.

Intellectually, war is the more convincing bet. Things will likely take a turn for the worse, sending us to the brink of a second October War, the sixth or seventh such confrontation.

Indeed the process has already started: an Israeli national-unity government including Likud is imminent; Barak's ultimatum to the Palestinian leadership to end the violence, when most casualties have been inflicted on that camp; and a call for extremist factions of the Arab world to cease and desist. The ingredients of a conflagration are there, the result is mathematical. War has started and no one knows how it will end, possibly in chemical weapons and another round of warfare in and around Palestine.

Now let faith in peace try to imagine some appeasement: the starting point is Barak's Sunday evening declaration. What, in this declaration, can be defused, what can be built upon?

Barak has given Yasser Arafat two days to impose peace upon his people, as Arafat is the only one able to do so. This is a significant recognition of Arafat's leadership role. Furthermore, Barak asked Arab-Israelis to join him in peace and to work with him on a democratic Israel. This amounts to a recognition that Israel is not democratic for Arab-Israelis.

Finally, he warned Syria and Lebanon to stop the escalation on Israel's northern border, but he did not make the release of captured Israeli soldiers a condition to the prevention of war.

How is it possible to build on this constructively?

First would be a call by Arafat for peace. This could be met half-way by Barak's acceptance of a Palestinian-Israeli inquiry into last week's shooting of 12-year old Mohammed al-Durra, and as a symbolic gesture, Israel's arrest of the soldier or soldiers responsible.

Second is a call by Arab-Israeli MPs for a national-unity government one of genuine peace and bridge-building, one in which Arab-Israelis, not Likud, would be the partners.

A true national-unity government means three to four positions for Arab-Israeli ministers. Barak owes this to the Arabs who ensured his victory in the last elections and to those who were killed inside Israel last week. Likud should have the option of joining, but not at the expense of these positions, which would reflect Barak's readiness to democratize Israel.

Third is a call by the Syrian and Lebanese governments to immediately reconvene talks according to the Madrid provisions, in which the release of all prisoners, the reaffirmation of the principles of Resolution 242, and the gradual settlement of any outstanding issues would be negotiated.