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## Weak leaders, social chasm doom accord

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The cause of peace in the Middle East appears to have received new life recently: Osama bin Laden's son, Omar, suggested that his father wants a truce with the United States, and President Bush predicted that Arabs and Israelis would reach an historic peace accord by the end of his presidency.

Throughout his recent trip to the Middle East, the president stated that Arab and Israeli leaders had assured him in recent months that they were ready to make the choices necessary to end their decades-old conflict. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert seemingly confirmed Bush's confidence when he told the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* Israel risked becoming an apartheid state if Israelis failed to seize this opportunity for peace. Strikingly, Olmert's statement dovetails with the core argument of Jimmy Carter's book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*.

Unfortunately, President Bush is unlikely to achieve his goal. Both Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas are weak leaders and lack mandates to resolve the status of Jerusalem, refugees, Israeli settlements and other contentious issues. Indeed, Olmert is the most unpopular prime minister in Israel's history and maintains his majority in parliament through the support of a religious party that opposes any negotiations on Jerusalem. Abbas controls only Palestinian territories in the West Bank, while the Islamic party Hamas, which opposes negotiations, controls the Gaza Strip. Presumably any agreement with Abbas would not include Gaza.

## Arab Israelis overlooked

Even if Israel and the Palestinians had stronger leaders, it is unlikely that either could reach a domestic consensus because of deep social divisions. Not only are secular and religious Israelis at odds, but many Jewish and Arab Israelis — after decades of peaceful coexistence — detest one another. Avigdor Lieberman, a leading Israeli Jewish politician, argues that Israeli Arabs are a "fifth column" far more dangerous to the country than terrorist groups bent on destroying Israel.

Israeli Arabs view Lieberman as a bigot and a symbol of the discrimination that they have endured for years. On the other side, internal Palestinian disagreements over political power, resources and religion often lead to fierce intercommunal violence and produce different approaches to Israel. While Abbas called for negotiations to address recent Israeli military incursions into the Gaza Strip, Hamas launched rockets into Israel to force Jerusalem to accept a cease-fire and lift its embargo on Gaza.

Finally, as our election season goes into full swing and Americans focus on his possible successor, Bush may find it increasingly difficult to get the support he will need to finalize a peace agreement. Here it is worth noting that recent Mideast peace agreements included billions of dollars of aid from the U.S. and other wealthy states. Bush will not be able to get such aid without the help of Congress, the Saudis and others. His hopes must depend on a number of factors.

He must have felt at least a slight chill of uneasiness when he was repeatedly asked by many Middle Eastern officials who he thought would win the 2008 U.S. presidential election.