

ADDRESSING THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – CHAPTER 5

AFTER SEVEN YEARS ON the back burner of American foreign policy, Arab-Israeli peacemaking needs to become a priority for the new president. Recent trends in Israel and the Palestinian territories have created a situation in which the option of a two-state solution may soon no longer be possible. Failure to forge an agreement will present serious complications for other American policies in the Middle East because the Arab-Israeli conflict remains central not only to Israel and its neighbors but also to the way most Arabs view the United States. Failure will also inevitably pose new strategic and moral challenges for American foreign policy. The need for active and sustained American peace diplomacy is therefore urgent.

The Obama administration's agenda in the Middle East will be crowded: the Iraq war, Iran's nuclear program, the war on al Qaeda, and the supply and cost of energy. These immediate issues make it harder to emphasize Arab-Israeli peacemaking since many of the costs of ignoring it are not directly visible (such as the impact on Arab public opinion) or are long term, such as the consequences of the collapse of the two-state solution. While Arab-Israeli diplomacy should be an important goal of the new administration, it can succeed only as part of a regional initiative that frames the Arab-Israeli issue in the context of other American priorities.

Because the way an administration frames its foreign policy objectives is highly consequential for the direction and effectiveness of any particular initiative, very early in the administration, the president should announce a multitrack "framework for security and peace in the Middle East" that connects the Arab-Israeli conflict to the regional and global agenda.

Resolving this conflict is an important American interest. This is not to suggest that settling the Arab-Israeli

conflict can resolve all the other challenges Washington confronts in the region. Nevertheless, it is a mistake to underestimate the importance of the conflict, even beyond its psychological role in the political identity of most Arabs: it is certainly central to Israel, the Palestinians, Syria, and Lebanon. It remains important to both Jordan and Egypt, the only two Arab states at peace with Israel, who could be drawn further into the conflict if the two-state solution collapses. The conflict remains the prism through which many Arabs view the United States and the source of much of the Arab public's anger with American foreign policy. It is a primary source of militancy, and it is a source of influence for Iran in the Arab world. Pro-American governments in the region face internal public pressures whenever the conflict escalates. While Arab authoritarians have withstood this pressure through repression and co-optation, the gap between publics and governments in the region is wide. This has been a constant source of empowerment for militant groups posing threats to the regional order and to American interests. The American commitment to Israel and American interests in the Arab world ensure that when conflict escalates, the United States is affected or drawn into the conflict. As the United States seeks to end the Iraq war while minimizing its detrimental consequences, regional cooperation in that effort becomes more likely when the Arab-Israeli conflict is reduced. Arab-Israeli peace could change the regional environment for American foreign policy, open new alliance options, and turn public opinion against al Qaeda, much of whose support appears to be based on the logic of the "enemy of my enemy" rather than on an embrace of its agenda.

In designing a broad framework for security and peace in the Middle East, the new administration should learn from the failures and successes of previous American diplomatic efforts. Of particular note are the lessons

drawn in a recent report by a study group of the United States Institute of Peace (of which one of us was a member).² Specifically, the Obama administration should undertake a number of steps on the Arab-Israeli front:

- Begin by recognizing that an effective diplomatic initiative aimed at a lasting peace cannot be attained so long as the Palestinians are organizationally divided and without an enforced cease-fire with Israel. These divisions could become even wider if Palestinian presidential elections are not held in January 2009 and Hamas (the Islamic Resistance Movement) no longer recognizes the legitimacy of the presidency. Thus, American diplomacy must begin with the twin aims of encouraging an effective cease-fire and supporting a Palestinian unity government. A unity government negotiating with Israel is not sustainable so long as Hamas carries out violent attacks against its Palestinian competitors and Israel. A central feature of Washington's diplomacy must be to work with its regional allies to induce Hamas into an effective cease-fire coupled with sustained regional efforts to limit the flow of arms into the Palestinian territories.
- Recognize that Hamas's power stems from genuine support among a significant segment of the Palestinian public and that Hamas will likely remain a spoiler as long as it is outside of Palestinian governing institutions. Although there is no guarantee that the organization will play a more constructive role within a national unity government, Washington should support conciliation between Fatah and Hamas as a way to diminish the Islamists' incentive to undermine negotiations, forcing Hamas to either accept a peace agreement that addresses Palestinian rights or lose the support of the Palestinian public. The aim should be less to "reform" Hamas than to put in place political arrangements that are conducive to successful negotiations and that limit Hamas's incentives to be a spoiler.
- Encourage Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab actors to pressure Hamas to police the cease-fire agreement with Israel and to convince the Hamas leadership to accept the April 2002 Arab League Peace Initiative, especially as Israeli leaders

are voicing renewed interest in that plan. In this context, the United States should be willing to drop its insistence that Hamas accept the Quartet's criteria—recognition of Israel, renunciation of armed struggle, and adherence to previous Israel-Palestinian Authority agreements.

- Recognize that no one can predict election outcomes in Palestine, as the Bush administration discovered, that elections are unlikely to resolve the current Palestinian divisions, and that they cannot be a substitute for efforts of political reconciliation, although such elections should be supported.
- Hold Israel to its commitment to freeze new construction of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and in the Jerusalem area. Critically, this freeze should halt the construction of new communities, outposts, and "thickening" of existing settlements, which often entails expropriation of additional Palestinian land. In addition, Washington must urge Israel to allow Palestinians greater freedom of movement throughout the West Bank. In Gaza, provided the cease-fire between Israel and Hamas holds, the Israelis must permit a greater flow of goods in and out of the territory.
- Appoint a special peace envoy to pursue actively a final-status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, while coordinating with other tracks of negotiations. A special envoy, however, cannot be a substitute for the direct involvement of the president or the secretary of state, who must be engaged to sustain an effective diplomatic effort.
- Put forth American ideas on final status in the Palestinian-Israeli track at the appropriate moment. To keep the hope of a two-state solution alive, this should be done sooner rather than later.
- Work to bolster and train Palestinian forces to police effectively the West Bank and lay the ground for capable unified Palestinian security forces after an agreement is reached.
- Support Turkish mediation in the Syrian-Israeli negotiations and become more actively engaged in these negotiations as both sides have indicated a strong desire for an American role. The United States should also return its ambassador to Damascus.

² Daniel C. Kurtzer and Scott B. Lasensky, with William B. Quandt, Steven L. Spiegel, and Shibley Z. Telhami, *Negotiating Arab-Israeli Peace: American Leadership in the Middle East* (Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2008).

- Encourage the continuation of a Lebanese national unity government and its participation in negotiations with Israel.
- Activate two new multilateral tracks: one addressing regional economic cooperation, especially in a postpeace environment, the other addressing regional security cooperation.
- Develop a plan for the deployment of international forces in the West Bank and Gaza once a peace

agreement is in place; these forces will be essential in the implementation phase for building a unified Palestinian police force and beginning the effective separation of Israelis and Palestinians. Their deployment must commence immediately following an agreement to help coordinate the peaceful withdrawal of Israeli forces.