

COMMENTARY

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Incentives and Peace

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Unless distrust, insecurity, and illusions are first addressed, no incentives—however sweeping and compelling—will motivate Israel and the Palestinians to make the critical concessions needed to reach a peace agreement.

The international conference convened by France on June 3rd in Paris to advance the Israeli-Palestinian peace process ended up without concretely establishing specific measures that would persuade both parties to resume negotiations in order to reach a peace agreement. The joint communiqué issued following the conference stated “The participants discussed possible ways in which the international community could help advance the prospects for peace, including by providing meaningful incentives to the parties to make peace.”

Although the conferees agreed to reconvene again later this year and offer some incentives to both sides to restart the negotiations in earnest, I maintain that no incentives, however extensive and compelling, will succeed unless preceded by a period of reconciliation between Israel and the Palestinians. In fact, if Netanyahu or Abbas *refuse to engage in a process of reconciliation*, this would strongly suggest that they are not interested in reaching a peace agreement, let alone making the major concessions necessary to achieve peace.

While incentives will eventually become necessary to lock in an agreement, there are three essential impediments that must first be mitigated in order to change the Israelis and Palestinians’ perception of each other to enable them to negotiate in good faith.

The three elements are: the embedded *distrust* between the two sides; concern over *national security*; and the *illusions* that significant constituencies on both sides continue to entertain, which ultimately deny each other's right to an independent state of their own.

Distrust: The pervasive and mutual distrust cannot be mitigated through negotiation nor dispelled by simply agreeing to begin to trust one another—it is a process that must be nurtured over a period of time. According to the philosopher Jay Bernstein, “trust relations provide the ethical substance of everyday living. Trust relations are relations of mutual recognition in which we acknowledge our mutual standing and vulnerability with respect to one another.”

Distrust remains one of the most daunting problems that continues to haunt both sides and has become engrained in the minds of nearly every Israeli and Palestinian, as neither has made any effort to mitigate it. On the contrary, they have and continue to take demonstrable actions on the ground in ways that only deepen distrust.

By way of example, Israel continued building and expanding settlements, Hamas constructed tunnels in Gaza for offensive purposes, certain Palestinians and settlers engaged in wanton violence, and leaders on both sides displayed public acrimony. Moreover, personal chemistry and communication between the Israeli and Palestinian leadership was and still is completely absent.

Continuing distrust has automatically created a dogmatic attitude of stubbornness and reinforced assumptions about each other's true intentions. Moreover, the absence of trust leads to social paralysis and the loss of hope while evoking fear, a deep sense of uncertainty, and the inability to foster social bonds. As a result, both sides became suspicious of every action taken by the other regardless of how well intended they were, as mutual scepticism led to the sense of futility in making any concessions.

To be sure, little effort was made to engage one another through mutual conciliatory interactions to cultivate trust. Instead, they used the public stage to malign the other, further deepening hatred and distrust rather than building new bridges. As a result, the absence of trust has sunk too deep to be simply rectified at the negotiating table. It must thus be nurtured to allow both sides to view one another as a potential partner worthy of being trusted.

In the final analysis, distrust can be mitigated only through people-to-people interactions. Both sides need to take confidence-building measures to faithfully demonstrate they can, in fact, begin the process of learning to trust one another and commit to reaching mutually agreed-upon terms of engagement that will pave the way for a durable peace. Some of these measures could include but are certainly not limited to the following:

Israel can stop or at the very least slow the expansion of settlements during this period. It should bring an end to collective punishment and night raids, and work closely with Palestinian internal security to prevent extremists on either side from undermining this process. Another measure is releasing nonviolent Palestinian prisoners, or allowing them increased visitation rights so families can regularly visit.

The Palestinians can also take certain measures, beginning with stopping all public incitement, working closely with Israel in pursuit of extremists within the territories, engaging regularly in a positive public narrative, openly talking about the need to reconcile with Israel, and stressing the inevitability of coexistence between both peoples. To be sure, people-to-people interactions over a period of at least 18 months will be necessary to cultivate a degree of trust that would allow both sides to view the other through a more positive lens.

National security: There is a current state of fear and anxiety for the future experienced by both sides, which is constantly fed by a deep sense of national insecurity. This concern is largely informed by experiences, as both can in fact make a strong case as to why they are troubled by national security concerns. For the Israelis, these experiences include random shelling, acts of extreme violence like the multiple stabbing incidents over the last 8 months, car bombings, and existential threats emanating from Iran and groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah. By constantly invoking a sense of insecurity, it became the state's mantra, often prompting Israel to take uncalled for measures to presumably enhance its security while further aggravating the Palestinians' sense of insecurity.

In regards to the Palestinians, their constant and overarching fear is related to their understanding that Israel is and will always remain the most powerful state in the region, and that under no circumstances can they ever overwhelm Israel through force. To paraphrase Henry Kissinger, Israel's absolute security renders the Palestinians absolutely insecure. That sense of insecurity fosters a constant concern often reinforced by fear of night raids, home demolitions, loss of territory, and administrative detention, among others. The fact that Israel can take, at any time, measures deemed necessary under the guise of protecting its own national security has created a deep sense of vulnerability among the Palestinians.

In addition, regional volatility and the development of events over which neither side has complete control do not allow them to take security for granted. The sweeping regional upheaval, including the civil war in Syria, the rise of ISIS, and the impact of the violent Sunni-Shiite conflict, has a direct and indirect effect on the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians and creates heightened anxiety, which inhibits making any concession that might affect their national and individual security.

Even if both sides are persuaded to stop all activities that promote or instigate concerns over national security, it will still take time to fully collaborate and regularly take consistent and

mutually complementary practical steps of reconciliation to allay some of these national security concerns.

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Although the conferees agreed to reconvene again later this year and offer some incentives to both sides to restart the negotiations in earnest, I maintain that no incentives, however extensive and compelling, will succeed unless preceded by a period of reconciliation between Israel and the Palestinians. In fact, if Netanyahu or Abbas *refuse to engage in a process of reconciliation*, this would strongly suggest that they are not interested in reaching a peace agreement, let alone making the major concessions necessary to achieve peace.

While incentives will eventually become necessary to lock in an agreement, there are three essential impediments that must first be mitigated in order to change the Israelis’ and Palestinians’ perception of each other to enable them to negotiate in good faith.

The final element (in addition to distrust and national security) is the illusions that significant constituencies on both sides continue to entertain, which ultimately deny each other’s right to an independent state of their own.

Illusions: In *The Future of an Illusion*, Sigmund Freud offers the following definition: “...we call a belief an illusion when a wish-fulfilment is a prominent factor in its motivation and in doing so we disregard its relations to reality, just as the illusion itself sets no store by verification.” What is characteristic of illusions is that: 1) they are derived from deep human wishes, and 2) the belief is held (or would be held) in the absence of any compelling evidence, or good rational grounds, on its behalf.

Both sides have a very powerful and widely influential constituency that still believes they can have it all. In Israel, parties such as Jewish Home, which is led by Naftali Bennett and part of the coalition government, still believe that much of the West Bank should be annexed and that no viable Palestinian state should be established as Israel can manage the conflict indefinitely.

On the part of the Palestinians, groups such as Hamas believe that all of Palestine, including Israel, is Palestinian territory, and that under any circumstances (and despite occasional statements to the contrary) Israel should not exist as an independent Jewish state. At best, they believe that the Jews can live in Palestine under Palestinian rule.

Both sides have been living with illusions about these issues and are imbued with a zero-sum approach, as if any gain by one side must be at the expense of the other. Unfortunately, the leadership on both sides have done nothing but promulgate these beliefs, and even less to disabuse themselves of these illusions.

Since illusions answer to inner needs, having to give them up can be an extremely painful, even traumatic experience. As a result, one of the major obstacles to adopting the Arab Peace Initiative (API) has been that many Israelis are still not prepared psychologically to relinquish some of their most cherished illusions (i.e. acquiring the whole land of Israel). On the other hand, the Palestinians, especially Hamas, also want to control the entire mandated Palestine, which is illusionary as well.

Israel's illusions have served to create the logic for occupation, ultimately perpetuating the dehumanization of the Palestinians. Israel's political leadership clung to these illusions and never understood the mind-set of the Palestinians.

The Palestinians, for their part, cling to their illusions just as blindly and desperately as the Israelis, which leads to resistance to and fear of change. This has contributed to making the Israeli-Palestinian conflict both chronic and intractable, as the various illusions are continuously and consciously nurtured by daily encounters between the two sides.

Finally, illusions are also fed by experience itself—since the creation of the state of Israel, neither side has come to terms with the fact that coexistence is not one of many options, it is the only option.

Incentives:

Given that these three points need to first be mitigated, any and all incentives provided have to occur once these issues have been largely allayed, while preparing the parties to embrace the overall framework for peace based on the API. In fact, providing any incentives prior to a period of reconciliation could undermine the effort to persuade both sides to make the necessary concessions for peace. Indeed, if they begin to benefit before making practical concessions, there will be no compelling reason to concede on anything, as has been the case in the past, and hope that their position could be further strengthened as time passes.

In an interview with *Le Monde*, French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault, stated following the June 3rd conference that “I am targeting two outcomes for this meeting [a follow-up international conference]: confirmation of the prospect of a conference with the parties by the end of the year and the creation of several working groups, one of which will be on the theme of economic incentives, e.g. the offer of a special partnership with the European Union and an association agreement for the future Palestinian State.”

Foreign Minister Ayrault is correct to suggest that incentives are necessary to persuade both sides to come to terms with each other's rights and existence. These incentives, however, will not work unless, as stated above, they are preceded by a period of 18-24 months that allows for the mitigation of the three elements addressed above.

There is no doubt that finalizing a peace agreement would require significant incentives, and to that end the EU, along with the US, can offer the Palestinians the following, among other incentives: committing to raising billions of dollars to resettle and/or compensate the Palestinian refugees; and providing financial aid for the building of infrastructure throughout the Palestinian territories, in particular the building of schools, hospitals, and clinics, as these social and civic institutions are critical for the development of their future state. In addition, the EU can grant special provisions for Palestinian students to study tuition-free in European universities, provide guidance and assistance in the development of democratic institutions, and offer training and provisions for internal policing and security.

In regards to Israel, the EU can upgrade its association with Israel into a comprehensive partnership with increased trade and investments, and enhanced scientific and cultural links. In addition, the EU and the US can offer a financial aid package, similar to the ten-year plan currently being negotiated between the US and Israel, specifically for revitalizing debilitated, poverty-stricken areas in Israel, particularly those in urban locales.

Another potential incentive is establishing a special strategic association between Israel and NATO. Such an association would also provide a security umbrella to Israel, particularly in dealing with any potential threat from Iran. This measure will make it known that the US and the EU are prepared to come to Israel's aid against any material threat emanating from any source.

Conclusion:

Although a majority of Israelis and Palestinians realize the inevitability of coexistence and presumably understand the general parameters of a negotiated peace agreement, biased and selective perceptions, reinforced by historical experience and incompatible ideologies, have locked both sides into immobile positions. The factors that maintain and enhance these patterns include emotions such as fear, distrust, insecurity and illusions; the psychological outcome is mutual denial of the narrative of the other and mutual de-legitimization. Put together, the operative result is stagnation and polarization.

What is therefore needed is a consensus-oriented dialogue and people-to-people interaction over a period of time, *before they can sit and negotiate*, to resolve the issues of perception—a tall order given the current environment that buttresses rather than ameliorates negative perceptions. Yet, this remains the only starting point that could usher in a negotiating process to successfully end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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