

## **COMMENTARY**

**No. 78**

**Tuesday, 16 October 2012**

### **Only the US Can End the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

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**T**he Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be resolved without the direct and active involvement of the United States, using both inducements and coercive diplomacy to bring about a peaceful solution. If the conflict remains unresolved over the next couple of years it will most likely precipitate a massive violent conflagration to the detriment of the Israelis and Palestinians and will also severely damage the U.S.' security, economic interests and its credibility in the region. For these reasons, what the next president of the US does within a few months after his inauguration will determine the future prospect of a solution, and the extent to which the candidates adhere to their campaign rhetoric will have a clear and immediate effect on how the Israelis and Palestinians react to any new American initiative to resolve the conflict.

Mitt Romney's position toward the conflict raises serious questions not only about his timidity but also his short sightedness in connection with a complex conflict that has been simmering for decades and will, without a doubt, explode if a resolution is not found soon. In a number of bewildering statements, Romney blamed Palestinian "culture" as the cause of their current predicaments and faulted them for having "no interest whatsoever in establishing peace." With these comments, Romney is in fact sending the Israelis a clear message that they should maintain the occupation, further expand the settlements, and keep the blockade on Gaza, while inferring the US will not bother to interfere. Conversely, Romney's message to the Palestinians is that they have missed many opportunities in the past to achieve peace, their yearning for statehood is a pipe dream, and they should expect little, if any, assistance from a Romney administration.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, however, as the Palestinians watch young men and women in several Arab states fighting and dying for their freedoms, their own relative passivity at the present will not last forever. Romney's preference of "[kicking] the ball down the field," (that is,

letting events take their own course) is dangerously misguided and ultimately detrimental to the cause of peace.

Indeed, should Romney become President and move to translate his campaign rhetoric into policy, he will seriously endanger Israel's very existence, which he presumably wishes to protect, and will compromise its future as an independent democratic Jewish state while contributing to its isolation from the international community. At the same time, he will encourage the Palestinians to rise up out of desperation and hopelessness to end the occupation at whatever cost, akin to the rise of Arab youth against their own governments who are prepared to die for their freedom.

President Obama himself has contributed to the current impasse in part by insisting early in 2009 that the peace negotiations should start by first freezing the settlements, which was a nonstarter for the Netanyahu government, and by failing to visit Israel when he travelled three times overseas visiting four Arab/Muslim states. The president went to Turkey in April of 2009, in June of the same year he visited Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and in November 2010 he travelled to Indonesia. For most Israelis, skipping Israel three times was nothing short of a slap in the face, especially in light of the fact that the President made a solution to the conflict a top priority by appointing former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell as a Special Envoy to the region only 2 days after his inauguration. To demonstrate his seriousness about the urgent need for a solution, the next President must visit Israel and the Palestinian Authority and make it abundantly clear where the US stands.

Nonetheless, President Obama, throughout his presidency and recently reiterated in his speech at the U.N. General Assembly, has insisted that the only solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict rests on creating two independent states, a Jewish and a Palestinian state living side-by-side in peace while growing and prospering together as neighbours. Any other message coming from the White House, regardless of party affiliation, will fundamentally be injurious to both the Israelis and the Palestinians. The notion from some American politicians who have said that the US should not have a greater desire for peace than the parties to the conflict is short sighted. The US has serious stakes in the region and responsibility toward its allies. The lack of peace will continue to undermine the U.S.' interest, erode its influence and jeopardize its role in shaping the outcome of the multiple upheavals sweeping the region in the wake of the Arab Spring.

To advance the prospect for peace between Israel and Palestine, the next president must take a number of critical steps. First, within a few months after the election, the President should visit Israel and Palestine and directly address the Israeli people as well as the Palestinians, strongly suggesting that only peace will serve their greater interests. He must look into the eyes of the Israeli and Palestinian public and emphasize that the US is committed to a two-state solution and will remain consistent and resilient until such a resolution is achieved. The president should also accentuate that the US will use all means available at its disposal to advance the two-state solution and stress that further delay would only harden the many facts on the ground, especially the expansion of settlements, becoming irreversible and rendering any future peace agreement virtually impossible.

Second, the President must carry with him a general framework for an Israeli-Palestinian peace based on prior agreements negotiated between the two sides, especially those achieved in 2000 (at Camp David between Yasser Arafat and Ehud Barak) and in 2007-2008 between Ehud Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas. In both sets of these comprehensive negotiations, the two sides have been able to resolve the vast majority of the conflicting issues. In the 2007-2008 talks, then-Israeli Prime Minister Olmert stated both sides had come “very close, more than ever in the past, to complete a principle agreement that would have led to the end of the conflict.” These prior agreements should be placed on the table anew and modified in order to create a clear basis for negotiating a peace agreement with the U.S.’ direct participation.

Third, to increase the framework’s effectiveness, a new internationally recognized special envoy of the calibre of President Clinton should be appointed with a clear presidential mandate to work relentlessly to advance the negotiating process while keeping a top level American official in the region to press on with the negotiations during the occasional absence of the special envoy. To avoid deadlocks, the rules of engagement should be based on an incremental agreement on various conflicting issues, ideally starting with borders. The Palestinians should abandon their precondition to freeze the settlements before they enter the negotiating process. An agreement on borders will in and of itself resolve 70 to 80 percent of the final status of the settlements and define the parameters of the Palestinian state. Such an agreement will also facilitate the negotiations of other conflicting issues, including the status of Palestinian refugees, Jerusalem, and Israel’s national security. Finally, the negotiations should not be open-ended; a timeline must be established, albeit with some flexibility, to prevent either party from playing for time.

Fourth, it is imperative that the US reaches out to other leading Arab and Muslim states such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, to exert pressure on the Palestinian Authority to make necessary concessions. Egypt must also be approached about beginning the process of influencing Hamas to change its open enmity towards and hard line policy against Israel. In particular, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood-led government should persuade Hamas to renounce violence as a tool by which to reach its political objective of establishing an independent Palestinian state and remove from its charter the clause that calls for Israel’s destruction. These Arab states, especially Egypt, have serious stakes in finding a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Indeed, any new conflagration between Israel and the Palestinians will impact directly and indirectly not only on their interests, but could also draw them into the conflict which they want to avoid at all costs given their own internal political combustion and uncertainty.

Fifth, once the Israelis and Palestinians engage in negotiations, the US should press both to immediately begin the process of changing their public narratives about each other by mutually ending acrimonious statements and expressions of hatred and distrust. To that end both governments should encourage universities, nonpartisan think tanks, and media outlets to deliberate publicly about the psychological dimensions of the conflicting issue and begin a process of changing mindsets about some of the inevitabilities of reaching an agreement.

Even when the leaders reach an agreement behind closed doors, they cannot simply come out with pronouncements of concessions that were made by either side without first preparing the public. For example, an agreement on Palestinians refugees will of necessity entail the return of

only a small fraction of refugees to Israel proper under family reunification, when in fact the vast majority of Palestinians still believe in the right of return. Additionally there can be no two-state solution without Jerusalem becoming the capital of Israel and Palestine, albeit the city will remain united, which will be difficult for the Israeli public to accept. For these reasons, changing public perception about each conflicting issue is central to ratifying any peace accord.

Sixth, in reaching out to the Arab and Muslim world, the President should help reignite the Arab Peace Initiative (API) which still represents the most comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The revival of the API remains critically important as even top Israeli officials, including the former head of the Israeli Mossad, Meir Dagan, have stated that the plan is central to resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. As the whole region undergoes revolutionary change in the wake of the Arab Spring, restarting the API will have special importance in reaching a comprehensive peace and long-term stability. The creation of a “sovereign, independent Palestinian state,” which the API calls for, will greatly contribute to stabilizing the region. Indeed, various Arab and Muslim countries will begin to normalize relations with Israel and foster a lasting peace that will ultimately improve the lives of millions of ordinary citizens throughout the region.

The Arab-Israeli conflict has been overshadowed in recent months by international concerns over Iran’s nuclear program, the bloody civil war which continues to rage in Syria and the unending insurgencies and terrorism that continues to plague many nations. Meanwhile, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is quietly simmering underneath the surface and is becoming ever more perilous. Israel continues to expand existing settlements and legalize others while the Palestinians remain hopelessly factionalized and aimless, unable to present a unified front to be taken seriously, and thus, leaving the festering conflict in the hands of radicals on both sides.

For either President Obama or Mitt Romney, finding a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should remain a top priority. The status quo is explosive and it can only lead to a new violent and death-defying confrontation that will leave no victors behind but will result in horrifying destruction and will irreparably deepen the already existing divide between the two sides.

The United States has both the interest and the responsibility to put an end to the Israeli-Palestinian self-consuming conflict in a region where the stakes for all concerned cannot be overestimated.

**Note:** This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir’s web portal. Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/only-the-u-s-can-end-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict/>

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