

CONFERENCE POLICY REPORT

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TWENTY YEARS AFTER MADRID LESSONS LEARNED AND THE WAY FORWARD FOR ARAB-ISRAELI PEACEMAKING

The Madrid Peace Conference, convened at the initiative of the United States on Oct. 30, 1991, brought Israelis and Arabs together in face-to-face negotiations for the first time. The multilateral framework that was the hallmark and legacy of the conference ushered in a process aimed at resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, 20 years after this historic initiative, peace remains elusive. The parties are at a stalemate and the regional political environment is rapidly transforming, generating great uncertainty about the trajectory of Arab-Israeli relations.

Within this context, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy on Nov. 2, 2011, commemorated the 20th anniversary of the Madrid Peace Conference by convening Arab, Israeli, American and European diplomats, policymakers, business people, academics and civil society activists at USIP's headquarters in Washington, D.C. The goal was to reflect on the key achievements of the Madrid conference and to draw lessons learned from that period – and from the intervening years – that might be instructive in the current context of stalled negotiations.

The conference began with remarks from former President George H. W. Bush. In a prerecorded interview with Baker Institute founding director Ambassador Edward P. Djerejian, Bush pointed to the changed geopolitical landscape in 1991 that provided the opportunity that his administration seized upon to bring about Madrid. As the president noted, the historic peace conference was not only a “mission of hope,” but also a chance for all parties to be realistic, and for the United States to demonstrate honest and determined leadership in the role of peace broker.

Former U.S. Secretary of State James A. Baker, III, took up this theme in his keynote address with a sobering analysis of current conditions. He concluded that, while an urgent need exists to kick-start the peace process, the chances are slim that any real progress will be made between now and the U.S. presidential election in 2012.

The conference plenary and breakout sessions covered a range of topics – from U.S. diplomacy, core negotiating issues and the economic implications of the conflict to identity politics, grassroots initiatives and the Arab uprisings. Throughout the day, this fundamental challenge of reconciling urgency with a lack of ripeness for progress was rigorously debated. Four key points of general consensus emerged by day's end:

1. The two-state solution remains, as Baker noted, the only “rational approach” to ending the conflict, but the window for such a solution is rapidly closing as settlements expand and as the influence of radicals and spoilers increases on both sides.
2. The uprisings and political transformations sweeping the Arab world offer the long-term prospect of great social, political and economic benefit to the region, but the more immediate-term effects are uncertain and unpredictable, creating a set of challenges for mobilizing the parties back to the negotiating table.
3. The current domestic political landscapes for Palestinians, Israelis and Americans do not augur well for progress. The Palestinian polity has yet to solidly unify, though efforts are underway, and the current Israeli

governing coalition does not appear inclined toward a furtherance of the peace process. Electoral politics in the United States do not favor the prospect of bold moves toward pushing the parties back on track.

4. There is urgency to getting the parties to the negotiating table and to resolving the conflict before time runs out on the practicability of the two-state solution, and before the simmering prospect of violence becomes the alternative that takes hold.

Accordingly – and in keeping with Baker’s prescription for focusing on initiatives that would keep the process alive in the absence of major political breakthroughs – the following recommendations emerged through the panel presentations, debates and broader participant discussions for forging a way forward.

WAITING IS NOT AN OPTION

Israeli, Palestinian and other Arab participants were forceful in their push-back on waiting until after the American presidential election to try for progress. The prevailing view was that this leaves too much time for the situation on the ground to deteriorate to the point of making impossible a comprehensive settlement based on a two-state solution. It is imperative that American leaders – in addition to Arab and Israeli leaders – act boldly and act now to restart direct negotiations. The multilateral framework that was the hallmark of the Madrid Peace Conference offers a strong model for moving forward.

SEIZE THE OPPORTUNITY AND INFLUENCE THE COURSE

A key narrative of the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference was that it was the result of a captured opportunity amid global historic change. In his keynote address, Baker noted that on the eve of the Madrid conference, the combination of global and regional realignments in the Middle East, as well as America’s emergence as an unmatched global superpower in light of these changes and its role in Operation Desert Storm, made it possible “to unlock diplomatic gates that had blocked Middle East peace for decades.”

There is prevailing trepidation regarding the trajectory of events unfolding in the Arab world and, for some, this uncertainty is a prescription for

waiting on the peace process until the proverbial dust settles. Israel has understandable anxiety as to the future of its existing relations – and the peace treaties that define those relations – with Jordan and particularly with Egypt. Likewise, with former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak gone from power, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has lost much of the Arab cover upon which he strongly relied to make difficult decisions and compromises in the service of a settlement. However, absent the ability to predict where the dust will settle, a strong argument was made for seizing this current moment of historic change in the Middle East and for turning it into an opportunity to kick-start the peace process, much as was done in 1991. The emerging Arab leadership will need, in an unprecedented manner, to take the will of the public into account in the crafting of foreign policy. All indications, to date, are that this would not bode well for the future of Israel’s relations with its Arab neighbors. The increasingly influential political role of Islamist parties represents a significant challenge and cause for concern in this regard.

Yet, as post-uprising societies and polities emerge, the Israeli government should seize the moment – with the support of the United States – to help shape the narrative and direction of change. This view calls for the Israeli leadership to lean forward toward a renewal of the peace process rather than retreat defensively to the sidelines. Likewise, the American leadership should work to reinforce its credentials and credibility as an honest broker in the region. Accordingly, it should be consistent in its support for the goals of freedom, democracy and social justice being espoused by Arab citizens who have brought their demands to the street in peaceful protest. The Palestinian leadership must also seize this moment in history to forge meaningful unity of polity and position.

APPROACH THE TABLE WITH A UNIFIED POSITION

The popular anger and protest movements leading to their regional counterparts’ downfall was not lost on the Palestinian leaderships of Fatah and Hamas. In April 2011, concern over their own fates in this context forced the two parties to forge a reconciliation agreement in the face of Palestinian popular anger at the ongoing division. Yet this was an agreement of necessity unaccompanied by genuine conviction and did not translate into the unity to which it laid claim.

(In February 2012, three months after this conference, the two factions agreed on the formation of a unity government with Abbas at the helm. But it remains to be seen whether this can overcome the reality of a Palestinian polity that does not lend itself to the representation of a unified negotiating position).

Likewise, while the West Bank leadership under President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad has shown genuine and lasting commitment to nonviolence, Hamas has not articulated or demonstrated a similar conviction. It would be essential for the success of future negotiations that any Palestinian unity government that would incorporate Hamas in its leadership come to the table unified in its rejection of violence and in agreement on pursuing Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. As Baker noted: “The Palestinians must be united in supporting negotiations for peace ... one set of security services, one negotiating position and one authority.” The challenge, in this regard, is clear. Even as January 2012 ushered in a series of Jordanian-mediated meetings between Israeli and Palestinian envoys with the limited goal of getting the parties to agree on terms for an eventual resumption of official talks, Hamas renewed its call for the Palestinian Authority to boycott negotiations.

IN THE MEANTIME ...

While the Israeli, Palestinian and Arab panelists in the conference coalesced around the need for immediate resumption of negotiations, the view of former U.S. diplomats and negotiators was more divided. In short, while all agreed that a deeply engaged U.S. president was essential for negotiations to succeed, there was division over the realistic ability – or desirability – of the president to attempt bold moves until the start of a second term. This debate went unresolved, but the question of what can and should be done in the absence of diplomatic progress generated more consensus. Baker addressed this at the outset of the day, iterating three goals for the United States to promote until “time is ripe for a bigger deal”:

1. Keep Gaza as calm as possible. In the wake of Gilad Shalit’s release, explore the opportunity to work with the Israelis to reopen Gaza and, above all, keep the ceasefire in place.
2. Work to maintain the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel since, in its absence, no Israeli-Palestinian peace deal would be possible.
3. Ensure that Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation continues at the same time that the

United States promotes Palestinian institution-building and economic development.

In a closing session that brought together former U.S. national security advisers Zbigniew Brzezinski and Stephen Hadley, Hadley spoke forcefully in support of this third goal and the need for the U.S. administration to continue its support for the ongoing Palestinian state-building project that was the initiative of Fayyad. Participants in the conference uniformly pointed to the state-building initiative as a success story that has wrought tangible progress and benefits for the Palestinians in the West Bank. Working to help ensure its continued success is squarely in the interest of the United States, the Israelis and the Palestinians.

CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT, TERMS OF REFERENCE AND A CLEAR TIME FRAME

The headline of the day was that the United States needs to remain engaged in concert with regional players. As Brzezinski noted: “The parties to the conflict will never resolve it on their own.” Settlements are expanding, Israeli and Palestinian societies are rife with internal division, and the prospect of renewed violence is just over the horizon. Time is of the essence and the stakes are too high for all concerned to embrace a status quo that is not desirable but, more importantly, not sustainable.

On a positive note, as Brzezinski observed, there now exists “an unstated predisposition [on the part of the parties] to envisage peace in overlapping terms” in relation to borders and some form of demilitarized Palestinian state, as well as the unfeasibility of a full right of Palestinian return. But leadership and political will is necessary if such common vision is to be parlayed into a comprehensive settlement. The model represented by the Madrid Peace Conference offers a way forward in its multilateral framework and in its setting forth of clear terms of reference and definitive time frames. Strong and engaged mediation that can ensure enforceability of these terms and deadlines will be a key to success.

The 20th anniversary of Madrid is an appropriate time for all relevant parties to reflect on what can be achieved with what Baker identified as the key ingredients of “imagination, initiative ... political will and determination.” Stagnation and failure are too costly an option.



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For more information on the Baker Institute Middle East Conflict Resolution Forum, visit www.bakerinstitute.org/conflict. Information about the USIP is available at www.usip.org.