

United States Policy on Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations: Next Steps

President George W. Bush's June 24 speech provides a principled context to pursue an Arab–Israeli peace settlement. Perhaps conflict resolution between Arabs and Israelis has never been as distant or so close. Much will depend on the United States remaining actively and continuously engaged to summon the parties and the international community to translate these principles into action. The vicious cycle of violence, terrorism, and military force can be turned into a virtuous cycle of peacemaking in the framework of effective security measures, democratic and economic reforms by the Palestinians, appropriate responsive actions taken by the Israelis, and an effective role by the Quartet (United States, United Nations, European Union, and Russia) and the Arabs to influence the parties to demonstrate the political will to move forward. But, clearly, no one should be permitted to use the need for reform and the need for efforts to end terrorism as an excuse to put Arab–Israeli peacemaking on the back burner.

Conceptual Framework

The basic framework for a peace settlement is there, and one does not have to reinvent the wheel: United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions 242 and 338, the principle of land for peace, and the basic framework of the Madrid Conference of 1991 in terms of direct, face-to-face negotiations between Arabs and Israelis on the issues of land, peace, security, water and the interrelationship of all these factors.

President Bush stated his vision in his June 24 speech in an explicit and fundamental manner outlining actions to be taken by both Palestinians and Israelis:

—“Two states, living side by side, in peace and security.”

—“Peace requires a new and different Palestinian leadership so that a Palestinian state can be born.”

—“I call on the Palestinian people to elect new leaders, leaders not compromised by terror . . . and to build a practicing democracy based on tolerance and liberty.”

—“Permanent occupation threatens Israel’s identity and democracy. A stable, peaceful Palestinian state is necessary to achieve the security that Israel longs for.”

—“So, I challenge Israel to take concrete steps to support the emergence of a viable, credible Palestinian state. As we make progress toward security, Israeli forces need to withdraw fully to positions they held prior to September 28, 2000. And, consistent with the recommendations of the Mitchell Committee, Israeli settlement activity in the occupied territories must stop.”

—“The Palestinian economy must be allowed to develop. As violence subsides, freedom of movement should be restored . . . and Israel should release frozen Palestinian revenues into honest, accountable hands.”

—“The Israeli occupation that began in 1967 will be ended through a settlement negotiated by the parties, based on UNSC Resolutions 242 and 338, with Israeli withdrawal to secure and recognized borders.”

—“We must also resolve questions concerning Jerusalem, the plight and future of Palestinian refugees, and a final peace between Israel and Lebanon and Israel and a Syria that supports peace and fights terror.”

—“As new Palestinian institutions and new leaders emerge, demonstrating real performance on security and reform, I expect Israel to respond and work toward a final status agreement.”

The Diplomatic Challenge: Getting from Point A to Point B

The president’s last point is the crux of putting a mechanism in place that will translate this vision into reality. It is a daunting challenge, given the brutal realities on the ground between Israelis and Palestinians and the legacy between them of terrorism and violence, fear and humiliation over the last 21 months. *Nevertheless, the opportunity is there to move forward in translating the president’s vision of a final settlement through a process of implementation that can be phased with reciprocal obligations and actions on both sides—Palestinian and Israeli.*

First, it should be posited that the parties themselves cannot be the sole arbiters of whether or not there is progress on the ground along the lines the president has outlined. The international community—especially the efforts of the Quartet led by Secretary of State Colin Powell—has a key role to play here. Of interest in this connection is German foreign minister Joschka Fischer’s proposal for active international benchmarking of the progress made, or not made, on reform.

Second, the Quartet, while playing an important role, must make clear to the Arab states that they have a critical responsibility in influencing the Palestinians to move away from acts of terrorism and in reforming their political and economic structures. The Arab states must pursue this policy in word and deed. The Saudi initiative approved by the Beirut summit in offering the promise of full normalization of relations between the Arab countries and Israel in the context of

a comprehensive Arab–Israeli peace agreement is an important inducement in terms of the endgame and must be reiterated and underscored by the Arabs.

Third, movement forward must not be made hostage to the least common denominator of the terrorists and extremists. Therefore, Palestinian security measures on the ground, with or without an international component, have to be robust enough to control terrorism and violence. Because it is probably impossible to eliminate all acts of terrorism and violence, substantial and real efforts with significant prevention and reduction of incidents is a more realistic yardstick than total elimination. The latter standard would simply give Hamas, the Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Hezbollah, and other groups a decisive veto on moving forward toward final status negotiations.

Fourth, the humanitarian situation of the Palestinians on the ground must be addressed on an urgent basis as the president indicated through efforts by the international community and the Israelis to rebuild damaged infrastructure and provide for basic human needs.

Fifth, Israeli settlement activity must cease immediately and the United States, whose policy under both Democratic and Republican administrations always has opposed settlement activity, should use its influence with Israel to make that happen.

Phased and Reciprocal Obligations and Implementation

I. Reform and Reorganization of Palestinian Security Organizations

CIA director George Tenet's plan and efforts to reorganize the Palestinian security organizations and services must be bolstered at the political level by a clear mandate on the part of the Palestinian leadership to prevent and crack down on terrorism. The Israelis should move back in a phased manner—concomitant with demonstrable progress by the Palestinians—to the

positions they occupied in September 2000. This will allow the political process to move forward in terms of political reforms and elections in the Palestinian territories. Freedom of movement in the occupied territories and the release of Palestinian funds the Israelis are holding are necessary so that the Palestinians, the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the international community can restore the Palestinian social and economic structures. The Palestinians cannot be expected to implement political reforms and elections while under expanded Israeli occupation.

II. Political Reforms

As the security situation on the ground improves and Israel withdraws to the positions it occupied in September 2000, the full *implementation* of political reforms at the executive, legislative, and judicial levels can proceed. In this respect, a concerted effort by the Palestinians, in the first instance, to establish their institutions is central, aided, as appropriate, by others, including the Arab states that are involved in the drafting of a constitution and NGOs.

Serious consideration should be given to the establishment of a parliamentary democratic system that could represent the diverse political forces of the Palestinian community, with the creation of the office of a president who would be a head of state and a prime minister who would be a head of government. Arafat, if he were reelected in a free and fair election, could become head of state with power vested as head of government in a prime minister. The Palestinians are certainly familiar with this system as it exists in Israel. If the Palestinians choose another political system, a position could be created to acknowledge Arafat's historic role as the leader of the Palestinian people while also granting real political power and responsibility, both executive and legislative, to others.

Elections are planned for January 2003. In anticipation of these elections, real progress must be made on the above security and political reforms and on Israeli withdrawal to September 2000 positions in order to allow the democratic process to proceed in a free and orderly manner. In this respect, international electoral monitors, including the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI), can play an important role preceding and during the elections.

III. Peace Negotiations

Once there is progress on security and political reforms and institution building, the United States should take the lead, in an even-handed way and in close coordination with the members of the Quartet and the key Arab states, in the opening of political channels and dialogue between the Israelis and the Palestinians to prepare for full-scale direct negotiations leading to a final status agreement *within* the three years the president specified. In this respect, the establishment of a “Provisional Palestinian State” should be considered in the context of whether or not it will facilitate the endgame. The international standing of such an entity in contrast to a provisional government needs to be clarified.

Further, with the resumption of direct Israeli–Palestinian negotiations, the United States and the Quartet should make clear to the Syrians and the Lebanese that the goal remains a comprehensive agreement on all fronts and that the international community stands ready to facilitate this process. This will enhance our efforts with the Syrians and the Lebanese to support the policy on the Palestinian issue.

IV. The International Supporting Role

A major international donor effort is needed to support this policy. There may be some value in reinvigorating the multilateral committees set up at the Madrid Peace Conference, which includes all the major players in the Middle East region and in the international community for financial, developmental, and other assistance. These committees are in the fields of water, economic and social development, environment, arms control and security, and refugees. Alternatively, an international task force can be set up to deal with these issues.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, there will be no settlement of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict unless each side abandons the zero-sum game, gives up part of its dream, and makes some historic compromises. For the Palestinians, the absolute right of return of Palestinian refugees to pre-1967 Israel would destroy the very Jewish nature of the State of Israel and will not be acceptable to any Israeli government. For the Israelis, the dream of a biblical “Greater Israel” in Judea and Samaria with Israeli settlements will destroy the prospects for a Palestinian state and any viable two-state solutions. The parties came very close to agreement in the closing days of the Clinton administration—even abandoning their zero-sum game on the issue of Jerusalem. Now, the United States has outlined a vision for peace that incorporates a two-state solution in the context of Palestinian political, economic, and security reforms with reciprocal Israeli obligations and actions leading to final status negotiations and peace. This is a truly challenging but historic opportunity to arrive at a comprehensive Arab–Israeli settlement on all fronts.