

A new approach to Israeli-Palestinian conflict

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Although the clash between the U.S. and Israeli governments about the Israeli government's planned housing expansion in East Jerusalem may be abating, the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is no closer. President Barack Obama's peacemaking strategy is focused on reviving direct negotiations between the Palestine Authority and the Israeli government. Obama has taken some actions to improve the environment for such negotiations, but they are proving inadequate. Even if indirect mediated negotiations begin, the prospects of reaching a peace agreement through this process are quite dim.

A fresh approach is needed. The conflict must be transformed and conducted in a mutually acceptable nonviolent manner. Elements of the transformation have begun. The United States should enhance them to help bring about changes in the realities on the ground so that peace agreements will be attractive. The profound problems about the location of Jewish settlements, the control of Jerusalem and the rights of Palestinian refugees in the Diaspora may then become soluble.

Two ongoing developments should be given more support, and several constructive new actions should be undertaken. Doing that would demonstrate that a peaceful transformation is under way. Benefits for both sides need not await a final end-of-conflict agreement.

For example, Obama is continuing the program, begun four years ago, for training Palestinian troops to serve in the West Bank. The program is led by U.S. Lt. General Keith Dayton and is intended to thwart criminal groups and Hamas actions in the West Bank. The trained troops have been deployed and they have improved everyday security in Nablus and other West Bank areas. This has also helped improve local economic conditions.

Palestinian and Israeli nonviolent resistance and legal challenges to Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem are growing. Americans can increase their aid to such efforts, which raise the cost of the settlements and at times check their expansion.

The United States should support and initiate new actions to foster mutual respect and reduce humiliating relations. For example, U.S. consultation might be offered to assist Israeli soldiers in the West Bank to enforce the law when Jewish settlers harass Palestinians. The United States should stress the high economic and political costs to Israelis and Palestinians of the checkpoints in Palestinian territories. They should be greatly reduced and implemented in ways that allow for speedy and respectful passage, and eliminated very soon.

The asymmetries in the relations between Palestinians and Israelis should be reduced to improve the chances of reaching equitable and sustainable agreements. The recent improvements in the West Bank economy, promoted by the Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, are significant in building more cooperative relations. An additional

important step in this regard would be for the U.S. Congress to rescind legislation banning direct assistance to the Palestinian Authority. Channeling some funding through it would bolster its capacities and legitimacy and convey U.S. confidence in it. Obama should begin using his authority to waive the restrictions for national security reasons, which would allow some direct assistance.

The United States should work more with other governments and international organizations to ensure the security and welfare of Palestinians. Such international progress would also improve Israel's international standing and security. For example, efforts should begin now to establish an international fund for Palestinian refugees and their families. International planning for meeting their needs should be negotiated. Claims for compensation and resettlement would then be processed and programs for the integration of Palestinians in the Diaspora begun.

In another example, Palestinian economic efforts in the West Bank would benefit by preliminary membership of the Palestinian Authority in the World Trade Organization. The U.S. government should not oppose this, but rather support it, since the organization's rules would be safeguards for Israel and other countries.

The United States should give greater encouragement and support to peacemaking efforts and potential contributions of other states in the Middle East. This would include recent Egyptian mediating efforts between Hamas and the Palestinian leaders in the West Bank. Fifty percent of Israelis support talks with Hamas if needed to reach a compromise agreement and 62 percent support talks with a unified Palestinian government including Hamas.

In addition, recognition should be given to the effectiveness of the Jordanian military forces in securing the Israeli-Jordanian border to prevent arms or militants from crossing into Israel. Planning on that would obviate the need for an Israeli presence there.

Most of the Jews and Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories have come to accept a two-state solution as preferable to any likely alternative. But they despair of achieving it. The United States can help raise the expectations of its attainment, and thereby help negotiators reach agreements. The U.S. government, and American citizens, can take numerous actions that help build mutual trust and help create the environment in which negotiations can be successfully conducted and peace agreements sustained.

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