



SEPTEMBER 2009



The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Overcoming the impasse

THE LONG-PLAYING TRAGEDY of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict spreads ripples of antagonism across the world stage. For the sake of the people of that troubled land and the larger project of creating a civilized global future, it must be resolved. Despite the legacy of violence and enmity, a vision of two independent and cooperative states remains feasible. A new process of negotiation and cooperation can establish the political foundations and encourage the mutual trust needed for reconciliation and sustained peace. Keys to success include sound strategic principles, appropriate external actors, and a multi-pronged action agenda along the lines proposed here.

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Context

In a discordant world, few disputes garner more attention or arouse more emotion than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This protracted struggle in a land deemed holy by the three major monotheistic religions, and situated at the crossroads of East and West, North and South, carries deep symbolic and political significance. Its far-reaching ramifications roil the wider Mideast setting in which it is embedded as well as the still wider arena of geopolitics. The search for a pragmatic path to peace commands our attention, not only for the sake of the peoples of the region, but for the project of a harmonious global civilization. The transition to a decent planetary society requires both enduring ideals and strategic engagement with the vexing political realities that subvert our long-term goals.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and loosening of Cold War strictures, a propitious window opened for resolving decades of war and hostility in the Middle East. The Oslo Accords of 1993, framed as bilateral negotiations between two nations living side by side, brought hope to both; the failure of that process in 2000 unleashed a new cycle of violence, leaving a renewed legacy of despair, disillusionment and mutual mistrust. Subsequent developments – the Palestinian split into two hostile factions controlling separate areas, missile attacks and suicide bombings on Israel, the Israeli expansion of West Bank settlements and invasion of Gaza – further fanned anger and complicated the politics of reconciliation.

With the peace process seemingly moribund, Israel has retreated into a fortress mentality, literally building a barrier on its border (and beyond its 1967 border in places), while extremist settlers have widened their West Bank land grab. Meanwhile, radical Islamism has deepened its roots in the Palestinian polity as it has throughout the Middle East. These tendencies reinforce one another in a destructive spiral of suspicion and fear – the path to a barbarization scenario for the Middle East. The urgent question becomes, how can this impasse be overcome and a constructive cycle of trust and respect initiated?

Envisioning an Israeli-Arab Settlement

Although chauvinistic one-state visions, either Jewish or Arab, still have advocates, they must be categorically rejected for, with the two communities deeply entrenched, it would take a war of annihilation to get there. Similarly, calls for a single bi-national Israeli-Palestinian state are unrealistic and unhelpful for the practical task of fashioning a mutually acceptable settlement. History has shown that countries created as amalgams of deeply antagonistic communities can eventually collapse into civil strife – or even war as in the case of the former Yugoslavia. The legacy of mutual animosity would bode ill for the sustained amity of a single Jewish-Arab state. Rather, we accept here the widely-held goal for the region of two viable, independent nations living in peace.

In restarting a process toward that end, several strategic considerations are pertinent. First, forging a new agreement on process, although a necessary step, would not in itself guarantee success, as the failure of the Oslo Accords demonstrated. Second, a withdrawal of Israel from occupied territory is essential, but if undertaken unilaterally,

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rather than as part of a broader process to address grievances and guarantee peace, could lead to further violence, as occurred in the wake of earlier Israeli pullbacks from Lebanon and Gaza. Third, the point of departure for land allocation should be the 1967 borders with negotiations on any modifications and land swaps.

Finally, the ultimate condition for a sustained peace is a reciprocal shift from suspicion to trust, a process that must be cultivated over many years. Thus, while working to end the occupation and establish a new negotiating framework, a sustainable transition to a peaceful Middle East requires a resolute, long-term effort to nurture trust and hope.

With these considerations operative, a practicable near-term scenario for Israeli-Arab reconciliation emerges that can deliver security to all parties while respecting their legitimate demands for self-determination; promote regional equity and economic development; and advance the goals of sustainable resource use and environmental health. Although the specifics of such a multi-faceted solution must be hammered out by people from the region, we can sketch the broad contours of a workable approach.

Given the far greater area, population and resources of the Arab world, and the legacy of a century of conflict, Israel will need its security guaranteed throughout the whole process, if it is to abandon a fortress mentality. To make progress in overcoming the current impasse, it cannot be asked to undertake existential risks or to lose its identity as a Jewish state. At the same time, all Israeli settlement construction in the West Bank should cease, and Palestinians should be freed from daily intimidation at the start and assured full independence and a better economic future as a fundamental purpose of the process. In order for Palestinians to have trust in the process, it is essential that the benefits of a peaceful settlement be tangible and self-evident on the ground from the outset.

The economy of the region has to be restructured to reduce inequities, both within the Arab world, and between Israel and its Palestinian neighbors. With sufficient political commitment, the region has the capacity to reduce poverty and inequality by drawing on such wealth-generating engines as Gulf oil, Israel’s high technology sector, and, potentially, the nascent solar energy sector.

Despite the violence of the past decade, cooperation between the two sides has continued in energy and water, important areas of mutual interest and sound platforms for building confidence and trust in the future. The region’s bountiful solar resources offer an opportunity for joint development of renewable energy. The equitable distribution of scarce freshwater resources is basic to avoiding water conflict and establishing a sustainable peace. Success in these arenas can tangibly demonstrate the benefits of cooperative integrated planning.

At the broader regional level, all parties in the Middle East should be included in the peace process. The issues, particularly the disposition of Jerusalem’s holy places, reverberate throughout the region. A stable resolution requires the participation and legitimation of the whole Arab world, perhaps the whole Muslim world.

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Key Actors

In the absence of effective change agents, visions of peace will be stillborn. What actors can lead the way? What specific steps can be taken in the short and medium term? Many players have been involved in Middle East negotiations, including the United Nations, United States, European Union, and Russia (the so-called Quartet), as well as non-governmental organizations and other international bodies. Although they can play a supportive and convening role in the next phase, one or more of the key parties distrust most if not all of these institutions. Also, with the Middle East but one of several global concerns, the priorities of non-regional actors tend to shift in response to crises elsewhere.

Changing popular attitudes and the political calculus in the Middle East requires a tenacious and protracted effort. This can be undertaken most effectively by those who live there: the primary agents of change must come from within the region. Regional actors enjoying established relationships with the contending sides are best positioned for promoting sustained trust.

Three countries stand out for this role: Turkey, Egypt, and Jordan. Turkey already helps mediate Israeli-Syrian negotiations, Egypt is central to the Israeli-Hamas negotiations, and Jordan has long been considered a key broker for a peace agreement. This triad could be assisted by a second-circle of countries that have neither been involved directly in the violence or condoned it, such as Morocco, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states.

In addition, local grass-roots organizations, perhaps with the assistance of international non-governmental organizations, will have an important role in establishing human-scale associations across borders and countering demonized images of the “other” fostered by polarizing forces on both sides.

Moving Forward

The first step for building new momentum for peace is to alleviate the suffering of Palestinians without compromising the security of Israel. This will require Israeli withdrawal from nearly all occupied territories as well as concomitant establishment of a security structure that will protect the Palestinian population, on the one hand, and prevent the ascendance of terrorist groups in the vacated areas (which will be in close proximity to Israeli population centers), on the other. This will require the deployment of forces drawn from the countries noted above, with an international mandate supported by Arab states. Although considered temporary, this presence might need to last a decade or more in order to protect Palestinians and ensure Israel that extremists do not prevail. This key step could proceed before an agreement on permanent boundaries has been reached.

The second step entails widening the sphere of cooperation, thereby yielding early benefits of the reconciliation process. In the near term, developing an integrated energy and water infrastructure to improve the livelihood of the average Palestinian provides a critically important opportunity. A possible near-term project could utilize sparsely populated areas in Jordan, the Israeli Negev, and Egyptian Sinai for solar en-

ergy farms, which could serve both Israelis and Palestinians through construction of a regional grid. Another could provide all households with water of sufficient quantity and quality to meet basic needs.¹ More broadly, the combined assets of Gulf money and Israeli technology can underwrite special development zones for employing Palestinians.

Concurrent with these first two steps, negotiations should proceed on establishing the boundaries between Israel and Palestine, as well as between Israel and Syria.² On another track, a program of cultural exchange could be launched at multiple levels to cultivate mutual understanding and respect.

Finally, a regional settlement of refugees will have to be undertaken, for those who do not return to the Palestinian state, led by the Muslim world and financed through a comprehensive compensation agreement among Israel, the Arab countries, and the Palestinians, perhaps with international contributions. Concurrently, an acceptable arrangement for Jerusalem must be designed, one that gives all parties a sense of ownership and right of access, while preventing extremists on both sides from sabotaging the fragile process of establishing peace. This task will require a high level of cooperation that may emerge only as the process matures and confidence grows. If the program for reconciliation and cooperation outlined here seems overly optimistic, it is worth remembering that many of its elements are already in place. The Arab peace initiative could evolve into the framework of regional actors underpinning the process. Numerous proposals for water and energy development have been prepared, providing a solid platform for rapid deployment in an enabling political context. Working relations between Israeli, Jordanian and, to a lesser extent, Turkish and Egyptian security forces exist.

Most crucially, despite all that has happened, the popular hunger for peace and a new beginning runs deep in this ancient, troubled land. Rather than continue down a path toward a barbarized future, the region has an opportunity to turn toward reconciliation, sustainability, and human development. The steps outlined here point the way. It is not too late.

Endnotes

1 An Israeli-Palestinian team has outlined such an initiative: E. Feitelson, A. Tamimi, A. Bein, R. Laster, A. Marei, G. Rosenthal and S. Salhout, *Defining Water Needs for Fully Exploited Resources: A Necessary Step for Israeli-Palestinian Reconciliation*, Report to the Peres Center for Peace, Green Cross International and The Jerusalem Institute, April 2009.

2 For example, the Peace Park proposed for the Golan Heights would grant Syria sovereignty over the area while retaining Israel's access, thereby diffusing the issue of creating a demilitarized zone, a perennial bone of contention.

This Perspective was prepared by Eran Feitelson, head of the Federmann School of Public Policy at the Hebrew University, and Paul Raskin, Director of GTI. It benefited from a lively discussion among GTI's international network, a diverse group that found broad consensus on the pragmatic strategy outlined here, while differing on such fervent matters as historical culpability and long-term vision for the region.

Explore Joining GTI

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