Irish Pact Is Mixed Model for Mideast

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What do Middle Easterners have to learn from the Northern Ireland peace accord? Other than the common legacy of terrorism and the shedding of innocent blood, the two conflicts are fundamentally different and the solutions reached at Stormont last week and in Oslo in 1993 are very different, too.

But the record of the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians does have an important lesson for Northern Ireland: The tough part is implementing an agreement, not reaching it.

Since its start, the Mideast conflict has involved the threat of war. The states of the region have fought five wars during the last 50 years and, for much of that time, most Arabs insisted that settlement terms would require the dismantling of the Jewish state and the forced repatriation of most Israelis to their (or their parents') country of origin.

To be sure, the zero-sum nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict has mellowed over the past two decades, with Israel's signing of peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan and its leap toward reconciliation with the Palestinians in the Oslo accords. But in many corners of the region, from the Hamas-friendly slums of Gaza to the imperial palaces of Saddam Hussein's Baghdad, the old approach resonates.

In Northern Ireland, that threshold of violence was never approached. At no point in the 30-year history of the Ulster Troubles - even when terrorism was at its worst - has either Dublin or London even threatened war against the other, let alone come to blows. The Irish constitution's claim to Ulster was never pursued militarily; bloody confrontations between militias never descended into full-scale civil war, and Ireland never threatened the mass expulsion of Unionists back to the British isle.

Indeed, ever since Ireland gained its independence, the idea of war between the Irish and the British has been unthinkable. In contrast, few Mideasterners doubt that the moderation of most who have come to terms with Israel is only a function of the balance of power.

If the Arabs were stronger, Israel weaker and America indifferent, the chorus of "throw the Jews into the sea" would almost surely be as popular in official Arab circles as, sadly, it is today among the Arab intelligentsia and in some alleys of the Arab street. Convince the Israelis that Arab intentions have changed irrevocably, and peace would be at hand.

In fact, one of the main reasons Israelis chose Benjamin Netanyahu two years ago over Shimon Peres, one of Oslo's architects, was that the unreliability of and continued incitement from Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority had soured them on Arab intentions.

Ironically, despite the deep-seated nature of their conflict, Israelis and Palestinians have already progressed much further than the people of Northern Ireland in finding a solution for it. For all their problems, the much-maligned Oslo accords outlined a clear and mature pathway toward the final resolution of the conflict between two people who contest the same land - final status negotiations to settle all parties' outstanding claims.

In effect, those talks give each party a veto over their outcome and force the two sides to reach compromise and accommodation. (Regrettably, the resumption of those talks is more than a year overdue.)

Without derogating its historic significance, Stormont's great achievement, other than winning general acceptance of a rejection of violence as a way to solve political disputes, was to subject the British-Irish territorial dispute to the procreation principle.

According to this principle, whichever side has the majority of votes will eventually determine the sovereign status of the disputed province. Logic dictates that ardent nationalists and unionists will race to be fruitful and multiply. In the Mideast, this solution should cheer partisans of the Arab cause. Given disparities in Arab and Israeli birth rates, if that same rule were applied to the territory of the former Palestine Mandate - Israel, the West Bank and Gaza - the Jewish state would disappear in a generation or two.

Stormont does have one unusual, if largely symbolic, characteristic that Middle Easterners might emulate: the set of new, overlapping relationships that will wrap the narrow Catholic-Protestant clash in a larger blanket of political connections between North and South and among the elected assemblies in Dublin, Ulster, London, Cardiff and Edinburgh. In effect, since the negotiators did not or could not slice the pie, they found a way to ease their problem by baking a larger pie.

In the Palestinian-Israeli context, this would translate into an expansion of the current bilateral negotiation into a trilateral process that includes Jordan, which ruled the West Bank before Israel. Indeed, there is general recognition in the region that while there may be a bilateral contractual solution for the West Bank, there will, in the end, be a trilateral arrangement governing many of its political, economic and military aspects. The only question is when and how to bring the Jordanians into the process. Here, Stormont has a useful answer - the sooner, the better.

For U.S. policy, President Bill Clinton did get it right in a Good Friday press conference response: The lesson of Stormont for the Mideast is just don't ever stop. But an equally important lesson is don't ever try to dictate terms of an agreement. As history has shown, American engagement in Mideast diplomacy is necessary for its success, but not sufficient. In the Mideast case, Israelis and Palestinians don't need a distinguished ex-senator such as George Mitchell to help them achieve their own Stormont; they already made their own deal, without direct U.S. assistance, at Oslo.

Today, Washington's task should be to make Oslo work, using moral and political suasion to ensure that each party complies with the letter of its contractual obligations under those accords. It's been the tough part of Arab-Israeli peacemaking the last five years and, if the Mideast holds any lessons for the British and the Irish, it will be the toughest part of Irish peacemaking the next five years, too.

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