

The U.S. Role in the Peace Process:

A Perspective

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Brief Analysis

Amid continuing difficulties in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, focus has shifted to the role of the United States. There is a good deal of confusion concerning what the United States can and cannot do. The evolving role of the United States can be examined through a number of specific and general points.

- The United States is not a party to the conflict. That is not to deny that what the United States does or does not do has an effect on the Arabs, Israelis, and Palestinians, but the United States does not face the same risks as direct parties to the conflict. In this conflict, the basic decisions about the future have to be made by those involved. This is the reality and it is fundamental to the success or failure of the U.S. role as mediator.
- The United States has occupied and will continue to occupy a unique and irreplaceable position in regard to a settlement of the conflict. This is due to a combination of historical legacy, American experience in the negotiations, and the weight of American prestige and power. Above all, the United States enjoys more influence and confidence from the parties than any other external actor. These circumstances impose a unique responsibility on the U.S. government. It is important to remember that the United States has been involved in some form or another in every Arab-Israeli agreement.
- The United States cannot negotiate for the Palestinians and Israelis, nor can it sit on the sidelines and reduce its role to that of an observer. Therefore it is incumbent on the government to find the correct balance between not doing enough on the one hand and doing too much on the other. The dilemma for U.S. diplomacy regarding the Arab-Israeli peace process has always been about that balance, about finding the most effective role to play given the circumstances and parties' particular needs and interests at any specific moment in the process. The conflict evolved in phases over time, it can only be resolved in phases over time. Therefore, one must not look at U.S. policy as an all or nothing proposition. U.S. policy should be seen as a continuum. At any given time, the U.S. government plays a variety of roles, from defusing crises to raising money to support agreements to helping the parties overcome negotiating obstacles. The present administration faces a different set of circumstances than its predecessors. The Bush administration came to office with no active peace process. Its goal was to create a framework for negotiations and the convening of the Madrid conference was its major success. The first Clinton administration's goal was to build upon a process that was by and large self-sustaining. The United States assisted in implementing the Oslo accords, in reaching the Israeli-Jordanian peace agreement, and in organizing three successful Middle East and North Africa economic summits. Every Arab country with the exception of Iraq and Libya participated in some way in the process. Unfortunately, those are no longer the circumstances that this administration faces, and there is no longer a self-sustaining process. Negotiations are continuing, but they are not functioning as they should.
- U.S. policy is premised on the reality that the Oslo accords will provide a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Through Oslo, the Israelis and Palestinians undertook to recognize each other's existence. Mutual recognition turned an existential conflict into a political conflict with the possibility of solution. This is unchangeable. The withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza and West Bank cities and towns and the subsequent establishment of self-government in these areas, is irreversible. Any solution to the conflict will centered on the notion that Israel and some entity that embodies Palestinian nationalism can exist side by side. The fact that Palestinians and Israelis live in such close proximity to each other will guarantee that the current situation will not be frozen in place. Thankfully, Oslo points to the fact that Israelis and Palestinians are committed to negotiate the permanent status issues, rather than fight over them.

- Oslo's logic is not at risk, but the logic of partnership is. This logic made the implementation of Oslo possible. Oslo defied history in that it allowed Israelis and Palestinians to find a way out of their conflict. Leaders had to be willing to take risks and provide one another with the benefit of the doubt. Publics had to trust their leaders and believe that there was an alternative to protracted conflict. Presently, both of those dimensions to partnership are at serious risk. Since September, the U.S. has tried to address this crisis of confidence in the Palestinian-Israeli partnership. Efforts have been made to create the proper environment for negotiations. The United States government has promoted the idea that the acceleration of permanent status talks is the only way to achieve a durable agreement. Only when Israelis and Palestinians begin to signal to each other where the end game is can we test the proposition that there is a convergence between the parties. The logic behind the series of meetings between the Secretary of State and the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships last fall was to get them to respond to one another. This has not been successful. Therefore, now the logic of negotiating has shifted to see if the parties will respond to the United States. This is why the administration made the decision to begin sharing ideas on each discrete element of the four-point agenda: security, implementation of further redeployment, time-out (avoidance of unilateral action), and the possibilities of moving toward final status negotiations.

Washington must obviously address the needs of both parties if an agreement is to be reached. The United States is not interested in a process for the sake of a process. Rather, what is at stake is the basic idea that negotiations are the way to end one of the most dangerous conflicts of the century. The logic of negotiations from Camp David to the Hebron Protocols is at stake. America must find a way to insure that this logic remains the dominant ethic in the region. The costs and consequences of failure are too great to imagine.

◆ This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Jonathan Lincoln.

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