

The Arab-Israeli Peace Process: A Trip Report

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Jan 1, 1990

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Introduction

On May 14, 1989, the Israeli government announced its proposal to hold elections in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as a mechanism for initiating negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. Although many rushed to dismiss the initiative, it has become the focal point of efforts aimed at advancing the Arab-Israeli peace process. In particular, the United States, Egypt and, most importantly, Israel and the Palestinians are now actively engaged in discussions about how best to proceed with the proposal.

In an effort to examine the prospects for Israel's initiative, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy sponsored a fact-finding mission to Israel and the territories in late June 1989. Composed of 12 leading U.S. policy experts and journalists, the group met with Israel's top political leadership, prominent Palestinian figures from the territories, and a broad cross-section of Israeli and Palestinians representing different political tendencies. The group found that the elections initiative, while much maligned by outside observers, is being driven by genuine political and social pressures within the Israeli and Palestinian polities. Despite deep fears and suspicions, both sides share a basic interest in moving away from the status quo of confrontation and violence; both see elections as a possible means of doing so. It is this narrowly defined, through significant mutual interest that has provided the current opening for political progress, and which has sustained the peace process over the past eight months despite disruptive events that have led many to declare prematurely its demise.

12 pages

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