

Assessing U.S. Policy toward the Peace Process

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In-Depth Reports

Vice President Mondale

Much has changed over the past year -- in both the Middle East and in Washington. In the region, calm was shattered by the rocks of the Palestinian uprising and suddenly, the U.S. government understood the costs of leaving the peace process on the back burner. The result has been the personal and intense engagement of Secretary Shultz in trying to create a viable framework for peace talks between Israel and its neighbors. Secretary Shultz should be commended for his efforts to move the peace process forward. His missions to the region show that he recognizes the enormity of both the human and political stakes involved.

At this stage, the peace process should not attempt to achieve too much too soon. It should not try to decide questions of final status even before direct negotiations between Israel and its Arab partners begin. Nor should the peace process become hostage to an international conference, before it is clear that the Soviets will work for peace and not simply create more problems for the peacemakers.

One of the difficulties of the "land for peace" formula is that, other than Sadat, no Arab leader has ever offered "peace for land." In the absence of such a leader, the issue has inevitably divided Israeli politics and society. Yet it is essential that the upcoming Israeli elections produce a clear decision, because it is important that the next American administration be able to work on the peace process in partnership with an Israeli government that is united and clear about the direction it wants to go. The uprising in the territories can help create an Israeli consensus only if two conditions are met:

- First, Israel must have an Arab partner, capable of delivering true peace.
- Second, Israel must feel absolutely secure in American support and the idea that while the U.S. may offer its advice, it will never pressure Israel to pursue a course not of its own choosing.

There is already an across-the-board Israeli agreement about the need for an interim stage in the process in which Palestinians play an increasing role in controlling their own lives. This concept was embodied in the Camp David Accords and is part of the Shultz initiative. It provides the only realistic way to move toward a peaceful and practical relationship between Israel and the Palestinians.

In the short run, the uprising in the territories seems to have hardened positions on all sides. Israelis are finding it more difficult to compromise on long-held positions and Palestinians are euphoric at being able to upset the status quo. At the same time, there is a ferment and a volatility within both the Israeli and the Palestinian communities that must be grasped if the peace process is to move forward.

While it is clear that there is little likelihood of a breakthrough, it is imperative that the U.S. prepare a longer-term strategy of encouraging the parties to soften their rigid positions and begin thinking about areas of compromise and negotiation. The key word in this regard is "process" -- Washington must show that it is actively engaged in the process of moving the regional parties closer together so that a negotiation becomes possible. To be successful, such a process will operate on two basic rules:

• Work with friends and allies, instead of undercutting or pressuring them. U.S. policy must be based on the idea that Israel is not a client state but a strategic ally and committed friend. Moreover, U.S. policy should encourage Palestinians to take part in the process by reminding them that Washington is committed to working for what it agreed to at Camp David: "the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and their just requirements.

• Maintain a high level of activity so as to indicate to the parties that the U.S. is committed in both word and deed to the peace process. This may involve the appointment of a special Middle East envoy with presidential authority who will work exclusively on the peace process.

Ambassador Eagleburger

The United States cannot by itself create the conditions for a peace settlement in the Middle East; while it has formidable powers of persuasion, no progress toward peace can be made until Israel, the Palestinians and the other Arabs decide that they want to move toward a settlement. Under the current circumstances, it does not appear as though those conditions exist.

The Arab states have awakened to the realization that the Iran-Iraq war is far more important to their own security than the confrontation with Israel. Indeed, one of the causes of the uprising in the West Bank and Gaza has been the decision by the Arab states to turn their attention toward the situation in the Gulf.

There is clearly ferment inside the Palestinian community. But it is far too early to determine with any precision what sort of lasting effect the uprising will have on the Palestinians. That cannot be done until the events inside the territories play themselves out.

Inside Israel, the government is deeply split and does not know how it wants to proceed in the peace process. Until Israel can get its house in order, it is very difficult for Washington to do more than play on the margins and try to convince the Israelis that they need to come to grips with their problems. But the U.S. cannot solve Israel's domestic political problem for the Israelis and those who argue that the U.S. government should align itself with one or the other Israeli political party are making a very serious mistake.

Any doubt in the minds of Arabs about Israeli strength or about the solidity of the U.S.-Israeli relationship simply encourages Arab intransigence and risk-taking. While Americans may regret the strong-arm tactics Israel has employed to quell the uprising over the past several months, we have to understand that until some sense of order is restored, the Israelis will find it difficult to deal with their own political dilemmas. Therefore, U.S. policy must evince a certain sympathy with the problems Israel faces, even if we as Americans do not always like the means they use to deal with them.

There ought to be a certain concern about various proposals for an international conference. Perestroika is still an unproved case and until the U.S. has a better idea about how the Soviets would act in a conference setting, there should be more caution about promoting that idea as the procedure to get the peace process moving.

At the same time, that is not to say that the issue of the Middle East is not a worthwhile subject for discussion between the Soviet Union and the U.S. It will be the responsibility of the next president to explore all avenues of discussion with the Soviets and challenge them to act, not talk, about "new thinking." ❖

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