

How Trump Can Get Mideast Peace Talks Back on Track

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To garner support for a return to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, Washington needs to show that it will counter the Iranian threat in the region even as it coordinates tangible first moves by Saudi Arabia and the two parties.

Last week, President Trump met separately with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in New York. He again expressed his optimism that there was a "good chance" to achieve what he sees as the "ultimate deal."

As a long-time negotiator on the Arab-Israeli conflict, I applaud the effort to pursue peace. But I'm also wary of the fact that any push must be grounded in what is possible, because another failure will only deepen the cynicism that both Israelis and Palestinians feel.

And right now, on the surface, any new initiative would seem a fool's errand. Given their political circumstances -- Netanyahu's dependence on the right-wing in his government and Abbas' alienation from his public -- neither leader is willing to consider concessions to the other. Still, neither wants to be blamed for blocking the possibility for peace.

Progress, therefore, depends on each having an explanation for taking a step toward the other. The cover won't come from the United States but could come from the Arabs. Netanyahu can justify a move toward the Palestinians before his public and government if it is clear he is getting something from the Arabs, and especially the Saudis, that shows the region is responding to Israel. For Abbas, the Arabs can assume responsibility for the moves he makes.

The problem is the Arabs, in particular the Saudis, are not itching to play this role. Unlike in 2002, before the Iraq war and at the height of the second intifada, with bombs going off in Israel and Israel imposing tough measures on the Palestinians in response, the world's attention was riveted on this conflict -- and the putative Saudi leader, Crown Prince Abdullah, proposed what became the Arab Peace Initiative.

Today, the focus internationally and in Saudi Arabia is on other threats. The Saudis see Iran and its use of Shia militias as an existential threat. They see it on the march, fomenting acts of terror in its eastern province, creating a land corridor from Iran to Lebanon, and fueling war in Yemen.

In what might be termed "reverse linkage," it is not dealing with the Palestinian issue that will draw the Saudis closer to the United States; rather, it is the U.S. showing it will counter the Iranian threat in the region, even as it expects tangible Saudi moves on the peace issue, that can elicit active measures in support of the Trump administration's efforts. Yes, the Saudis would still need Israeli moves toward the Palestinians to explain their outreach to Israel to their own and other Arab publics, but the driver for them is seeing that the U.S. is serious practically, not only rhetorically, in limiting Iran's de-stabilizing moves in the region.

In this sense, the Trump administration has lots of work to do. Presently, it remains riveted on ISIS in Syria and Iraq, while the Iranians are positioning themselves to fill the vacuum that will emerge after Daesh's defeat. If U.S. policy is willing to accept that reality -- and we are not now preventing it -- we should also understand that the Saudis, Emirates and others will only offer nice-sounding generalities on Israeli-Palestinian peace.

To be fair, even if the Trump administration decides to convey that it will use our superior air power to prevent the Iranians and Shia militias from expanding further in Syria, the Saudis, Emirates and others are not going to normalize relations with Israel. For that, the resolution of final status issues like Jerusalem will be required. And, certainly at this point, Israeli leaders are not ready to put Jerusalem on the table.

But that still leaves room for action. The Saudis could be asked to announce that they will send a delegation to Israel to discuss common threats in the region and security assurances under the rubric of the Arab Peace Initiative. In return, Israel could announce that because of its commitment to two states for two peoples, it will not build outside the settlement blocs and will forswear sovereignty in the areas that are east of the security barrier -- or what amounts to 92% of the West Bank.

Here, the Saudis et al would be producing for the Palestinians and could join the U.S. in pressing them to stop seeking to delegitimize Israel in international forums; to end preferential welfare payments to the families of those who engaged in violence against Israelis; and to recognize that there are two national movements and national identities -- Jewish and Palestinian -- which is why they accept two states for two peoples.

None of this will happen by itself. Quiet diplomacy should be employed to orchestrate these understandings and have them announced simultaneously -- presumably at the time negotiations are resumed. This may not be the "ultimate deal" the President touts as within reach, but it would break the current stalemate and show that the Trump administration has made progress that eluded its predecessor.

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