

Open a Middle Road to Mideast Peace

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Even if a permanent deal isn't achievable right now, Washington can still foster a process that contributes to peacemaking.

Once again the pursuit of Israeli-Palestinian peace is at an impasse. President Obama speaks of a pause. Martin Indyk, the American envoy for the negotiations, talks of a reassessment. Secretary of State John Kerry's hopes for a breakthrough now seem distant, if not misplaced.

Do we walk away and let the parties stew in their own juices, as some in the administration are arguing? Do we put forward our proposal for resolving the core issues of the conflict even though they will almost certainly be rejected by both the Palestinian Authority's leader, Mahmoud Abbas, and Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu? Or do we continue trying to coax the parties toward a final-status agreement?

It's not surprising that the Obama administration is wrestling with these questions. But America's options must not be narrowed to a choice between a permanent deal or doing nothing. If that's the only choice, we know the answer: Nothing will be done. And a vacuum will be created and filled by the worst possible forces.

Instead of setting up a false choice, the administration should declare that it is not walking away from the conflict. Mr. Kerry should privately go to both leaders and tell them he's planning to issue the following public statement: "I am prepared to work with both sides to produce a permanent-status agreement provided I know that each of you is ready to take on the political opposition that you will surely encounter. If you are not, I won't force the issue. Nor will I walk away. Rather, I will focus with both sides on conflict management, instead of conflict resolution."

Mr. Kerry should also make it clear that if both leaders want the United States to continue to seek a final-status deal, then they must both tangibly demonstrate their commitment to a two-state outcome.

What would this mean for each leader?

Mr. Netanyahu would be asked to take two steps. First, he would have to declare that Israel will only build in what it

considers to be the state of Israel and that it will no longer build in what it considers to be the future Palestinian state. That would mean building only in certain designated settlement blocs and existing Jewish neighborhoods in Jerusalem. Second, he would have to pledge to open up what is known as Area C -- 60 percent of the West Bank's land -- to Palestinian economic activity.

Mr. Abbas would also be asked to take two steps. First, he would have to declare openly that he recognizes there are two national movements, involving the Jewish and Palestinian people, and that they are competing for the same territory -- and that the only way to fulfill both aspirations is to have two states. Second, he would be asked to state publicly that before Hamas can become part of the Palestine Liberation Organization, which is what Hamas has been seeking in each reconciliation agreement, including the current one, it must accept the P.L.O.'s position on renouncing violence and recognizing Israel's right to exist.

These respective steps are not designed to satisfy each side; they won't. Rather they are designed to demonstrate that each leader is prepared to take on the obstructionist constituencies on both sides that will oppose any moves that make a permanent deal possible.

If the two leaders are unwilling to take these steps, then it is time for Washington to shift its objective to conflict management. A conflict-management approach would not focus on producing formal agreements, which may be too difficult for both sides. Rather, it would concentrate on brokering smaller understandings and getting the two sides to take parallel or coordinated steps that could improve the reality on the ground.

For example, the Israelis could take a step called for in the Oslo process and carry out a "third further redeployment," which would involve turning over more authority to the Palestinians in more of the West Bank. If the Israelis were prepared to do that, the Palestinians, in turn, would be asked to forgo their attempts to join various international organizations.

There are variations on this theme: Israel might stop short of the redeployment but agree to allow the Palestinians to plan and build in Area C, if they knew that the Palestinians would abandon efforts to gain standing in the International Criminal Court in order to try to prosecute members of the Israeli government.

Other possibilities might include Israeli efforts to improve Palestinian access and trade between the West Bank and Gaza, or giving greater responsibilities to Palestinian security forces in parts of the West Bank, provided that Palestinians would reduce incitement in their media and in mosques, and enhance security cooperation with the Israel Defense Forces. Steps like these would mean that both parties would make commitments to American diplomats in parallel so that neither side at this juncture would have to make formal concessions to the other.

It's time for the Obama administration to challenge both parties to show which path they are ready and willing to pursue. In this way, Washington can demonstrate that it isn't more interested in peace than Israelis and Palestinians themselves, and that, even if a permanent deal isn't achievable right now, it can still produce a process that contributes to peacemaking.

Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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