

# Israel Must Set Out Its Parameters for Peace

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Michael Herzog was appointed Israel's ambassador to the United States in 2021. Previously, he was an international fellow at The Washington Institute.



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**As Hamas-PA reconciliation accelerates momentum toward an attempted statehood resolution at the UN, Israel should seize the initiative and announce its own peace parameters rather than standing still.**

**W**hen Barack Obama and Benjamin Netanyahu met in Washington last week, reports highlighted their differences. The US president laid out parameters for peace, ahead of the Israeli prime minister's speech to the US Congress this week. The result has seen an existing and dangerous deterioration in Israeli-Palestinian relations combine with a new rift with the US that Israel cannot afford.

Palestinians have just enacted their own version of the Arab Spring. In both the Fatah-controlled West Bank and the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, thousands took to the streets demanding not liberty or reforms, but an end to their internal schism. Under pressure, and in the context of regional upheaval, a deal emerged, surprising many.

Clearly a marriage of convenience, the parties admit it is unlikely to reunite the two Palestinian entities. Each has its own leadership and security forces, not easily moulded into one. Their agreement calls for elections within a year, when they are supposed to compete. In the meantime the deal allows them to form a government of technocrats and appear united when they go to the UN in September to seek recognition of statehood. Mahmoud Abbas, Palestinian president, has said he will not seek re-election and is focused on securing his legacy. Hamas is focused on legitimising itself in a bid to take over, once Mr. Abbas steps down.

Facade as it is, this deal poses a significant challenge to Israel and the international community. By dealing with Hamas, a movement hostile to peace, rather than waiting for Mr. Obama to lay out his vision, Mr. Abbas shows he has given up on negotiations. Hamas and Fatah could now join in pursuing an alternative to negotiations, through a unilateral move at the UN. While this will not produce a Palestinian state, it is likely to isolate Israel and escalate Israeli-Palestinian tensions. The Palestinian Authority is already encouraging a popular uprising against Israel. This could spin out of control, as we saw last week when thousands of Palestinians marched on Israel's borders.

This situation poses a policy conundrum. On one hand, who can oppose Palestinian unity, expressing the will of the people, which we so value elsewhere in the Arab Spring? There were, in any case, serious questions about a peace agreement with a Palestinian Authority that could not control the Gaza Strip. On the other hand, ushering Hamas into the tent undermines future negotiations with Israel. Hamas will probably use Mr. Abbas's eagerness to display unity to limit his leeway in returning to talks. If the UN recognises a Palestinian state on unilateral Palestinian terms it will also make it harder for Israelis and Palestinians to negotiate and compromise in the future.

In response, the Israeli government stated emphatically early on that it would not deal with a Palestinian government incorporating a movement unwilling to recognise Israel and renounce violence. This response sharpened the debate in Israel on the fundamental approach towards peacemaking in an era of regional uncertainty. Should Israel stand still, or seize the initiative?

There is a strong argument for the latter. As long as Israel lacks its own peace initiative, it will struggle to garner international support for calling on Mr. Abbas to choose peace with it over peace with Hamas.

Israel would do well to propose its own ideas and parameters for peace. These should address elements of importance to both parties, with the aim of establishing a framework for ending the conflict. The terms should include the 1967 lines with agreed land swaps as the territorial baseline for negotiations, and security arrangements that meet Israel's needs, including a demilitarised Palestinian state. If not in public, then at least in private with Mr Obama, Mr Netanyahu should have subscribed to such parameters, which the US and European Union could propose in response to the motion to the UN in September. The UN resolution may not be averted, but these moves could help balance the resolution, leaving the door open for negotiations. They could also test the real intentions of the two Palestinian factions.

The new Palestinian government should be judged also by deeds. Can it facilitate peace? Will it sustain the existing excellent Palestinian-Israeli counter-terrorism co-ordination in the West Bank? Can Hamas ultimately pass the test of democracy it has failed until now, by allowing free elections, even if it stands to lose? There is a broader context to these questions. Grappling with the political inclusion of Islamists is a region-wide problem. We should both be empowering moderates, and finding ways to test Islamists' commitment to sustained democracy and peace. This applies as much to Hamas as to any other Islamist player.

*Michael Herzog, The Washington Institute's Milton Fine international fellow, served as a key participant in nearly every Arab-Israeli peace negotiation between 1993 and 2010. ❖*

*Financial Times*

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