

## Crossing Thresholds for Peace Process

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Apr 15, 2011

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Articles & Testimony

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**Unless Netanyahu and Abbas cross historic threshold over the next month, the prospects for peace are likely to slide backward just as so much of the Middle East is trying to surge forward.**

**A**s the Obama administration grapples with the many implications of the Arab spring in the Mideast, the Israeli-Palestinian issue has been relegated to the sidelines.

But history has shown that it does not stay dormant for long -- as demonstrated in the latest uptick of violence. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reflected this Tuesday in her speech about Arab democratic reform. She suggested that Washington would soon be making a new push for peace.

Riding the wave of the Arab spring, Palestinians have amplified their calls that the U.N. General Assembly recognize a Palestinian state this September. Clinton reiterated her belief that there is no alternative to a negotiated peace between the parties -- as even senior Palestinian officials now quietly acknowledge.

Moreover, it is far from a panacea for the Palestinians, given the strain it is likely to create in Palestinian relations with Washington -- probably including the invariable congressional calls to eliminate funding.

Yet, in the current absence of negotiations, alternative approaches fill the vacuum. Social media reveals a dramatic upsurge in calls for Palestinian demonstrations outside settlements, and, more ominously, for a third uprising, or intifada.

One can imagine a West Bank incident going viral on the Internet, igniting public protests. The current impasse can easily accelerate the downward spiral into a September scenario.

Negotiations have remained stalled since the Israelis and Palestinians reopened talks for a few weeks last September. Israel blames the Palestinian Authority for its failure to negotiate peace.

The Palestinian Authority, meanwhile, insists that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu cannot come close to meeting its requirements -- given his current coalition configuration. So, the Palestinians claim, holding negotiations could only impair President Mahmoud Abbas's standing.

For its part, the Obama administration has been preoccupied with dramatic events sweeping the Arab nations in the Middle East.

Washington now needs to make one major push to get Israel and the Palestinian Authority to each cross a historic and transformative threshold to avoid the slide to September. Only the U.S. has enough authority to synchronize this move. Because neither side will cross a historic threshold without the other -- this must be in tandem.

There are reasons to act soon. First, the Europeans are increasingly urging the U.S. to join them in imposing negotiating terms. Though it is clearly preferable that the parties move on their own.

Second, House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) announced Thursday that he has invited Netanyahu to address Congress. This is likely to take place at the end of May, during the Israeli leader's scheduled Washington visit.

Many now predict that this congressional speech will be Netanyahu's second major policy speech. During his first major speech, shortly after taking office in 2009, Netanyahu said he no longer opposed a Palestinian state. He can now lay out the two-state solution he envisions -- which could potentially confound skeptics in the U.S. and beyond.

The U.S. should ensure that the opportunity of Netanyahu's speech is not wasted. The best approach would be a public statement of equal weight from Abbas.

The goal should be that each crosses a public threshold meaningful to the jaded population of the other side. Both men have to address the gut fear of the other side in order to create real momentum toward peace. In polls, majorities on each side say they want a two-state solution -- yet remain certain the other is unwilling.

The historic threshold that Israelis want Abbas to cross is his acceptance of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people, with equal rights for all its citizens. For their part, Israelis have no problem recognizing Palestine as a state for the Palestinians, with equal rights for all its citizens.

Such a move would address Israel's key fear -- that Palestinians will never accept the legitimacy of a Jewish state in the Middle East, irrespective of the extent of Israeli territorial concessions. These fears grow when Palestinian state-run media make wild allegations that dehumanize Israelis; or, as recently, when the Palestinian minister of prisoner affairs gave a plaque to the family of a terrorist who had killed 30 Israelis during Passover in 2002.

It is important that Israelis not fear that territorial concessions will render Israel more vulnerable rather than more secure. Mutual recognition can only be a credible part of a peace package if both sides commit to a vigorous public peace education campaign -- making clear that each has a historic attachment to the land, and the land must be shared.

The major historic threshold that Palestinians want Netanyahu to cross relates to territory -- since their big fear is Israel holding on to the West Bank. The Palestinians realize that Israel will not return to the precise pre-1967 borders. But they want assurance that the 1967 line will be the baseline for calculations in configuring the final border.

Any settlement blocs adjacent to the old boundary that Israel annexes should be offset, the Palestinians say, with land swaps from within Israel proper. The Palestinians say this is in line with Israeli offers to every other Arab state on its borders.

This approach allows Israel to keep up to 80 percent of the settlers who live in less than 5 percent of the post-1967 land, largely adjacent to the old boundary. The settlements could then no longer be viewed as coming at their expense -- because of the offset.

The two statements are unlikely to solve all the problems, since other issues remain -- including the crucial point about border security arrangements. Yet, statements affirming these intentions on territory and recognition could prove a breakthrough. They could dramatically transform today's barren political landscape.

Unless such historic thresholds are crossed, the prospects for peace are likely to slide backward just as so much of the Middle East is trying to surge forward.

*David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of the [Project on the Middle East Peace Process](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=16&newActiveSubNav=Peace%20Process&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D16&newActiveNav=researchAreas)*

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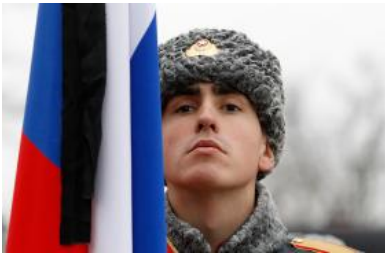
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