

Myths, Illusions, and Peace: Finding a New Direction for America in the Middle East

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

On June 17, 2009, Rep. Howard Berman and David Makovsky addressed a special Policy Forum at The Washington Institute to mark the publication of **[Myths, Illusions, and Peace: Finding a New Direction for America in the Middle East](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=310)** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=310>), coauthored by David Makovsky and Dennis Ross. Representative Berman (D-CA) is the chairman of the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs. David Makovsky is The Washington Institute's Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of the **[Project on the Middle East Peace Process](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC11.php?CID=65)** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC11.php?CID=65>). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Rep. Howard Berman

Dennis Ross and David Makovsky, in a brilliant book that calls for a "new realism" in the Middle East, reject the idea of "linkage" -- the notion that the key to solving every problem in the Middle East lies in ending the Arab-Israeli conflict. The authors, however, are passionate about the importance of U.S. activism in Middle East peacemaking. In addition, they emphasize support for regional reformers, because the Middle East public, now more exposed to international norms of good governance thanks to the internet and pan-Arab media, is growing increasingly impatient with governments that are not accountable.

The chapter on Iran will undoubtedly attract much attention because of Ross's position in the Obama administration as one of the primary shapers of Iran policy. Part of the excitement of reading this book, which was completed before the Obama administration took office, comes from measuring its analysis and recommendations against the emerging policies of the new administration. Not surprisingly, the prescription for Iran policy comes close to what the administration seems to be pursuing: namely, agreeing to talk to Iran while simultaneously persuading U.S. allies to declare support for significantly intensified sanctions if Iran does not suspend its uranium enrichment program. The authors refer to this concept as "engagement without illusions." Indeed, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has suggested that she is working with Washington's allies and partners to effect "crippling sanctions," should engagement fail. Still, it is unclear if U.S. allies -- much less the Russians and Chinese -- are on board with this approach. For now, it appears that even if they are prepared to impose tougher sanctions, they are not yet ready to

make this position public.

Representative Berman has introduced legislation that could greatly damage the Iranian economy, essentially prohibiting any foreign company from doing business with the United States if it sells or facilitates the sale of refined petroleum to Iran or if it helps to enhance or maintain Iran's capacity to refine its own petroleum. Because of its limited domestic refining capacity, oil-rich Iran must import approximately 25 to 40 percent of its gasoline. If imports of refined petroleum ceased, both the Iranian economy and the domestic political standing of the Iranian regime would suffer a heavy blow.

If engagement succeeds and leads to the suspension of Iran's uranium enrichment program, the bill will be withdrawn. But if the process of engagement falters, Berman will begin the process of passing the bill. Engagement must have a time limit to prevent Iran from simply running out the clock, and President Obama has said that by the end of this year the administration will have a good indication of whether engagement will succeed. The Iranians should view this legislation as a Sword of Damocles.

The authors' analysis of how Sinn Fein was drawn into the 1997 Good Friday agreement is also interesting, given that this experience is sometimes cited as a paradigm for bringing Hamas into the Middle East peace process. It is also worth noting that the current Middle East special envoy, George Mitchell, negotiated this agreement. According to the authors, the conditions placed on Sinn Fein were far stricter than those that the Quartet imposed on Hamas. Moreover, the authors claim that unrelenting British military pressure was a key factor in convincing Sinn Fein to renounce violence.

The volume closes with a cautionary note about the importance of the U.S.-Israeli relationship, warning that the United States should never "dissociate" itself from Israel, even if the two nations disagree from time to time. In Berman's view, even the recent disagreement over settlements and natural gas should not be allowed to mask the reality that there is far more convergence than divergence in U.S.-Israeli regional views and policies. This is all the more true since Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu recently endorsed the concept of the two-state solution.

A major breach with Israel, the authors say, would damage U.S. credibility throughout the region, calling into question the reliability of America's commitments. Going further, the Ross and Makovsky assert provocatively that most Arab governments prefer a strong Israel that is able to confront mutual enemies such as Iran, Syria, Hizballah, and Hamas. Indeed, the international community glimpsed this during Israel's 2006 war with Hizballah and its 2008 military action against Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

One of the hallmarks of the "new realism" propounded by this book is that it is grounded in Middle Eastern reality, taking fully into account the domestic political situations of regional actors. The United States might want to change the regional reality, but in order to do that -- the authors say -- it is critical first to understand it.

Myths, Illusions, and Peace is a fascinating and absorbing discourse on the Middle East. The congressman expressed his gratitude that one of the book's authors is helping direct America's Iran policy and the other is at The Washington Institute helping guide policymakers and the public alike through the complexities of the Middle East.

David Makovsky

America's place in the world and the purpose of its foreign policy can never be strictly based on the abstract concepts of power and interest. No policy is sustainable if it is not seen by the U.S. public and its representatives as serving some higher purpose. That is part of the American ethos. Thus, it is not surprising to see Americans concerned over the protests unfolding in Iran.

During the Cold War, the United States engaged the Soviet Union on nuclear weapons while it simultaneously promoted human rights and worked with Soviet dissidents, thereby balancing U.S. interests and values. While

Washington should attempt to duplicate the balance achieved during the Cold War, in regard to deterrence it should be cautious about using the Soviet Union-Iran analogy. During the Cold War, half a million NATO troops were stationed in Europe, but some key baselines were in place: diplomatic relations existed between the countries on each side of the East-West divide, and a White House-Kremlin hotline was operational for much of this period. Yet despite these realities, miscalculation remained a serious risk. Even if Iran is assumed to be a rational actor, these baselines do not exist in the U.S.-Iranian relationship, making a policy of deterrence substantially riskier.

The Bush administration's policy of isolation was unsuccessful, and therefore U.S. policy toward Iran should be characterized by engagement without illusions. Since the success of engagement is uncertain, in order to gain leverage, the United States must find ways to convey to Iran that if engagement fails, there will be profound consequences.

This book also seeks to debunk the idea of linkage, which declares that solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will solve all Middle East conflicts. Ever since Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration, Arab states have linked their relationships with the United States to how Washington deals with the Palestine question -- and later the state of Israel. Yet, with some notable exceptions, Arab states have largely aligned their policies with the United States based on their own national interests rather than on professed regional concerns. Even during one of the few times that the Arab states acted on this linkage -- the Arab oil embargo in the mid-1970s -- they lifted it within a few months due to inter-Arab rivalries and their desire to have close relations with Washington.

The United States should engage in peace efforts because resolving the conflict is desirable in and of itself and would marginalize and diminish the appeal of extremists who exploit this emotional issue. In approaching the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, neither a pure top-down or bottom-up approach is possible. The top-down approach assumes that all core issues can be solved immediately, but since some of them are currently intractable, this approach will not work. The bottom-up approach, which focuses on creating economic and security institutions and deepening Palestinian security cooperation with Israel, is important, but it cannot succeed on its own if the Palestinians think Israel is just buying time to expand settlements at their expense. This issue needs to be addressed or it will undermine the Palestinian Authority and benefit Hamas. The best way to deal with settlements is to render them moot by moving forward and demarcating a border between Israel and the future Palestinian state. Therefore, negotiations should begin with a focus on land; while it is not a simple issue, progress in this area is realistic.

The issues of security and settlements must be decoupled. Given the ongoing problem of rocket fire from Gaza and the fact that Palestinian security forces are only starting to be professionally trained, security will need its own track. The settlement issue, on the other hand, can be addressed now. Settlers should no longer remain in limbo; a demarcated border would place an estimated 75-80 percent of the settlers inside Israel. In exchange, the Palestinians would receive land swaps inside Israel equivalent to all of the West Bank. Successful land negotiations would prove that diplomacy -- and not terror -- is the key to making progress and achieving results. Solving the land issue will not solve the remaining contentious issues, but taking a pragmatic approach will demonstrate progress, and a clear plan can then be devised for addressing the remaining issues. If some progress is not achieved, the two-state solution will lose its credibility.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Julie Lascar. ❖

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