

Defining a 'Prediplomacy' Agenda for U.S.-Mideast Efforts

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Brief Analysis

Inheriting an uneasy truce in the Gaza Strip presents the Obama-Clinton-Mitchell team with an early set of critical Middle East tests. Before they can begin to address core issues in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, they will have to focus over the next several weeks on an agenda of "prediplomacy" issues. How they handle these issues will reverberate beyond the Arab-Israeli arena and set the tone for the new administration's regional diplomacy for the foreseeable future.

The Mitchell Appointment

President Obama came to office promising swift action on the Arab-Israeli peace process as part of an overhaul of U.S. Middle East policy that includes a pivot toward military withdrawal from Iraq and "tough diplomacy" toward Iran. The appointment of former Senator George Mitchell as special envoy has already given substance to the new president's commitment.

Mitchell brings several important qualities to his position. First, he survived his previous foray into Middle East diplomacy relatively unscathed as chairman of a 2000-2001 commission that investigated the origins of the second Palestinian uprising. The confidence-building measures he offered in spring 2001 as a way to deescalate the conflict were accepted in principle by Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) but were not implemented; along the way, Mitchell escaped without earning lasting rancor from either side. Interestingly, during his previous experience, Mitchell witnessed a move to the right in terms of Israeli prime ministers (from Labor's Ehud Barak to Likud's Ariel Sharon) that closely foreshadows the expected, although by no means certain, outcome of Israel's February 10 election. The difference is that U.S. politics also shifted to the right during that period, from Bill Clinton to George W. Bush; in contrast, in just the past week, U.S. politics has shifted to the left.

Second, outwardly at least, Mitchell seems not to be infected with the "Nobel virus" that plagues so many former politicians engaged in high-stakes diplomacy. In his previous Middle East stint and in his Northern Ireland diplomacy, Mitchell was consensual in style and pragmatic in substance, eschewing the histrionics and hectoring that often accompanies professional political do-gooders. This augurs well for Arab-Israeli diplomacy, since conventional wisdom -- which, in this case, is almost surely correct -- holds that major concessions by the parties are reserved for delivery to the president or at least the secretary of state. Mitchell's principal early task is to personify urgent, high-level engagement and set in motion a very detailed process of what can be called

prediplomacy, laying the necessary building blocks with uncertain leaderships in Israel and the PA, and with Arab and European capitals, for the possibility of more meaningful engagement down the road.

Third, it should not be lost on the parties that Mitchell has not endorsed the view of some other veterans of the Northern Ireland peace process, including former Bush administration envoy Richard Haass, about the importance of finding ways to engage Hamas in diplomacy. In a December 2008 presentation at Israel's Institute for National Security Studies, a careful Mitchell had only critical words for a Hamas that "continues both its rocket attacks and its refusal to recognize Israel's right to exist." He gave no hint of equating the urgency of engaging Hamas with the importance of including Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland negotiations, saying "No two countries, no two conflicts are the same. So what happened in Northern Ireland cannot be precisely replicated here or anywhere else." And with specific reference to how the United States and Israel need to coordinate their approach on critical issues, he made the following important comment: "As our two countries confront these challenges in a region filled with both peril and opportunity, it is essential that our president and your prime minister have a relationship of trust and confidence. Matters of tactics and timing are often subjects of disagreement, debate, of give-and-take between sovereign countries. This is inevitable, understandable, and should trouble no one. But on the major issues, including a comprehensive and sustainable peace between Israel and its neighbors, and turning Iran away from nuclear weapons, it is important that our leaders work together and agree on objectives and strategy."

A Non-Hamas Strategy

The administration's view on whether to engage Hamas will be the key signal of its approach on Arab-Israeli matters. So far, the decision seems clear: there is no hint -- neither in statements nor in personnel appointments -- that the Obama-Clinton team intends on dipping its toes in the Hamas waters without Hamas first meeting stiff international conditions for dialogue. The president himself reiterated those conditions in his State Department remarks introducing Mitchell.

This position has implications for U.S. policy toward the issue of Palestinian national unity. The United States has no particular interest in Palestinian unity except if it strengthens the PA and weakens Hamas; indeed, in the Arab-Israeli arena there is traditionally an inverse relationship between national unity and diplomatic progress that current diplomats buck at their own peril. (On the Israeli side, in contrast, Washington has never viewed Israeli political unity as a precondition for diplomatic progress -- quite the opposite!) It is one thing if PA president Mahmoud Abbas engineers a national unity agreement in which Hamas accepts Abbas's legitimacy and supremacy; it is quite another for the United States to urge national unity on the Palestinians as a way to ease Hamas's isolation and open the path to dialogue. The latter is manifestly not in the U.S. national interest.

Instead, the administration has the potential to develop and implement a four-pronged prediplomacy strategy on the Israeli-Palestinian front that includes the following elements:

1. Stabilize the truce by securing broad international contribution to and support of Egyptian-Israeli countersmuggling efforts: Nothing is more likely to erode the truce than the rearmament of Hamas. For its part, Egypt seems to have changed its view on the issue. In the past, Cairo countenanced at least a certain level of smuggling as a way to ensure that the Islamist extremists of Hamas focused their energies eastward, not westward. During the recent crisis, however, fear of Hamas's adventurism trumped Cairo's satisfaction at Hamas's ability to annoy Israel; the result was that Egypt withstood severe popular criticism for its laudable refusal to accede to Hamas demands to open the Gaza crossings. In this context, chances are better than ever that the United States, Israel, and other interested parties will work out effective mechanisms with Egyptian security and intelligence forces for a strategy of in-depth countersmuggling efforts; these would encompass not just the narrow confines of the Rafah border but a much wider area and would include initiatives to prevent the Iran-Somalia-Sinai arms trade.

2. Use the funds and process of Gaza reconstruction to further erode Hamas's standing: While Hamas suffered a substantial military blow in the Gaza conflict, shortsighted post-conflict decisions could have the result of restoring much of Hamas's tarnished luster. Apart from the question of direct political engagement -- which would have a hugely destabilizing impact on all other core parties in the peace process (Israel, the PA, Egypt, and Jordan) -- the most important issue concerns the vehicle for international reconstruction efforts in Gaza. The goal is simple -- Hamas cannot be allowed to serve as the agent for reconstruction, lest it reap political dividends from its role as indispensable provider of funds and services. The means to achieve this goal are complicated but not impossible. A key task for Mitchell is to work with Quartet envoy Tony Blair and other responsible international actors to create a system for funding and executing reconstruction efforts that has three paths -- through the PA, through PA-approved Palestinian charities and nongovernmental organizations operating in Gaza, and through international and UN aid agencies, working administratively with the PA. While the preference is for as much reconstruction aid to pass through the hands of the PA as possible, the real priority is negative, that is, to ensure that as little as possible passes through the hands of Hamas. This will inevitably mean a certain sacrifice of efficiency for the sake of rigidity and will also mean loosening rules on international civilians inside Gaza, on the principle of the greater good of cutting Hamas out of the reconstruction pie. But it is essential that every actor who wants to play a role in the reconstruction effort -- including UN agencies (like UNRWA) and international humanitarian organizations, many of which have heretofore displayed a disturbing level of sympathy for Hamas's political situation -- sign up to this principle.
3. Invest quickly and robustly in the Dayton and Blair agendas in the West Bank: Here, there is not a moment to lose. The Abbas-Fayyad government extended itself throughout the Gaza conflict and faces a very real threat to its existence. Despite implementing security, administrative, and economic policies that have resulted in substantial growth in the West Bank for the first time in years, there is a serious risk that the political reverberations from Gaza could undermine those important achievements and even threaten the PA regime. Working closely with Israel, the Obama administration has the opportunity now to change the rules that have hampered the operation of the U.S.-led "train and equip" mission for Palestinian security forces, headed by Lt. Gen. Keith Dayton, and ramp up that program to new levels. Similarly, the administration should channel Arab and European support into the shovel-ready projects prepared by the Blair mission. And, as this is happening, it could inject a dose of much needed coordination (translation: leadership) in making sure that Dayton, Blair, and the European Union's various initiatives on judicial, police, and administrative reforms are harmonized and working in tandem with each other.
4. Work to adapt, not merely adopt, the Arab Peace Initiative to provide a regional context to Israeli-PA cooperation: If nothing else, the Gaza conflict exposed the fundamental flaw in the Saudi-inspired Arab Peace Initiative, which is that Arab states cannot simply offer peace with Israel as the pot at the end of the diplomatic rainbow after Israel reaches final peace settlements with the Palestinians and the Syrians; rather, a truly constructive role would have Arab states contributing to a peacemaking environment at every stage of this process. Senator Mitchell has wide latitude in working with Arab leaders to add both substantive elements and a timetable for incremental action to the Arab Peace Initiative. This could include what Arab states do with Palestinians (for example, specific disbursements of aid and changes of national policies on the status of Palestinian refugees) as well as what Arab states do with Israel (for example, trade relations, escalating diplomatic ties, interfaith and cultural exchanges). Here, President Obama himself is uniquely placed to build on the message of his inaugural address, especially his call to end "childish things," by having Arab leaders end their sufferance of vile anti-Jewish incitement, which many Arab leaders may erroneously believe insulates them from popular criticism within their countries. (In this regard, recent editorializing by former Saudi ambassador to the United States Turki al-Faisal is particularly galling, since at the height of the Gaza fighting, official Saudi press extolled Turki's outrageous and incendiary statement that he only wished he could lead a "jihad" against Israel and be a shahid -- martyr -- for the cause of Palestine.)

This agenda would constitute the first phase of an Obama-Clinton-Mitchell effort, well before the administration

begins addressing issues of Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic negotiation. In even the best of circumstances, that diplomacy would have to await the establishment of a new Israeli government, which is not likely until mid-March at the earliest. And the administration does not inherit the best of circumstances. Unless it acts now to shore up the ceasefire, create a template for disbursement of Gaza reconstruction efforts through non-Hamas vehicles, bolster the PA in the West Bank, and redirect Arab efforts into tangible, constructive, near-term contributions to build an environment for peacemaking, the chances for an eventual successful reengagement in peace diplomacy are next to nil.

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