

# The Arab-Israeli Peace Process: Past, Present, and Future

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### Brief Analysis

Over the past twelve years a revolution has taken place in the landscape of peacemaking in the Middle East. Twelve years ago, direct negotiations were non-existent and there was no peace process. While negotiations themselves do not ensure an agreement, their total absence ensures that there can be no resolution. The United States has borne the burden of trying to create dialogue.

Before the 1990s, Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) rejected and denied one another. Although it conducted covert conversations with Jordan, Israel could only communicate in the open with one Arab country Egypt. Israel also lacked diplomatic relations with a large part of the world, including the Soviet Union, China, and India. The Madrid peace conference in 1991 broke the taboos of holding any meeting at all, and enabled discussion to occur. While there has been a change in the landscape of peacemaking, there has not been a comparable revolution in attitudes.

**A First Lesson: No Alternative But Peace** Among the series of lessons to be learned from the past twelve years, the first lesson is that, notwithstanding today's dilemmas, for the Israelis and the Palestinians there is no alternative to the pursuit of peace. This is not only because the two sides crossed the threshold of mutual recognition in 1993, making it very unlikely they could revert to mutual rejection and denial.

There is no alternative to the pursuit of peace because the empirical record demonstrates that there is no alternative. The process has lived through the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin its key architect and the man who had the profile and credibility on security to deliver promises. It survived many acts of terror including those that were concentrated over a short period of time four bombs in nine days during 1996. It endured under Israeli closures that have squeezed the Palestinians and at times put them under economic siege. It survived the election in 1996 of an Israeli prime minister, who despite the fact that he ran against the peace negotiations, did not seize on the violence and killing of fifteen members of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in September of 1996 as a pretext to end the process. Ariel Sharon, before even being elected prime minister, opened a channel to the Palestinians and they eagerly reciprocated. Both sides knew there was no alternative to peace. Given the proximity in which the Israelis and Palestinians live, there is no choice but to pursue peaceful coexistence. They cannot wish away the immutable

fact that they are neighbors. The alternative is perpetual struggle, pain, violence, and more victims and that is not a future that either side is willing to accept.

**A Second Lesson: Imposed Outcomes** Outside parties cannot impose an outcome on the Israelis and the Palestinians, nor can the parties impose an outcome on each other. Notwithstanding Israel's military power, there can be no military solution. Military force will not compel the Palestinians to submit to the Israeli will. Nor can the Palestinians impose a military solution on the Israelis. Violence and the Hizballah model will fail. Lebanon is not the West Bank, and violence will be counterproductive to Palestinian interests. Look at the record: In 1996, Binyamin Netanyahu was elected because of four bombs in the span of nine days. In 1999, Ehud Barak won precisely because there was no violence. In the last election, Sharon who cannot do what Barak was prepared to do in terms of the peace process won because of renewed conflict. Violence will delay the achievement of Palestinian aspirations. The Israelis will not make existential concessions in a hostile environment that raises questions about whether the struggle would continue regardless of any concessions made.

**A Third Lesson: Unilateralism** Unilateral acts will not prove successful, despite much discussion of unilateral disengagement, unilateral separation, and unilateral declaration of statehood. These concepts can only work if they emerge from a mutual understanding, be it formal or informal. For instance, Israeli unilateral disengagement would only create new focal points for conflict and escalation. The Palestinians would test or challenge whatever areas from which the Israelis have not disengaged. Likewise, if the Palestinians were to unilaterally declare statehood, there would be great potential for intensified hostility over constant tests of the limits and locale of Palestinian sovereignty. Even if the parties choose to take parallel steps, the steps will have to be coordinated.

**A Fourth Lesson: Negotiations** Negotiations themselves are imperative. But if they are to be successful, certain conditions need to exist. Dialogue cannot succeed in a sour environment, where there is no trust and no confidence. Talks, especially on existential questions, cannot succeed if the environment on the ground is completely divorced from the issues being negotiated. A party cannot say it is committed to peace and simultaneously promote hostility, incite violence, and socialize grievance. It is inconsistent and completely undercuts the ability to negotiate concord. The parties must prepare their public for peace by admitting that a resolution will require both sides to accommodate the needs of the other. No party will get everything it wants. In this respect, the Israelis under Barak made an effort to prepare their public and the Palestinians did not. Both sides must be prepared to condition their public for change and compromise. There has to be a readiness to try to understand not only one's own needs, but also those of the other side. It must be understood that there will be no deal unless each party's essential needs not essential wants are addressed.

At this point, neither party is capable of negotiating a permanent status agreement. If the Israelis and Palestinians cannot conclude a permanent deal now, then the challenge of diplomacy is to focus on the possible, not the unattainable. Statehood, security arrangements, and possibly disengagement could be issues that can be negotiated in the relatively near term. Parallel to any political process, there would need to be a new code of conduct on the ground that requires each side to uphold a set of responsibilities. The Palestinians must stop the incitement to violence, the socialization of grievance, the promotion of hostility, and acts of violence and terror. The Israelis must stop the expansion of settlements, the confiscation of property, and the demolition of homes. Even if permanent status issues of Jerusalem and refugees cannot be settled now, the goal is to build a pathway to peaceful coexistence.

**A Fifth Lesson: The U.S. Role** The U.S. role in the peace negotiations is indispensable but it has to be defined in the proper way. When the United States acts as broker, it usually signifies that the parties are incapable of negotiating and resolving the core issues. To resolve such issues, each side must prove to the other its readiness to take hard steps. A third party can help identify these hard steps, but credibility is built most effectively when each side proves to the other that it knows what must be done and that it is ready to do it. That said, there are times when the United

States can do what no other party can. If the alternative is violence and chaos, the United States should be actively working to change the realities on the ground and between the parties. If the parties are capable of negotiating on the core issues, however, U.S. involvement should take on a different character. Whether the United States offers critical clarifications, suggestions, ideas, or crucial assurances when the parties are facing historic thresholds, it should be careful not to take over the discussions.

The Bush administration, at this point, is judiciously taking its time. First, it must survey the current circumstances and put its people in place. Second, before the United States ought to get involved the parties need to demonstrate that they are truly ready to take steps that will move things forward. Inevitably, Washington will have to play a critical yet informed role in resolving a path to peace, because the reality of the Middle East tends to impose itself upon the United States.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Jacqueline Kaufman.

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