

Sidebar:

Arab-Israeli Peace Process

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Feb 1, 2000

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The following is a sidebar to Dr. Satloff's article "[The Next Turbulent Zone.](#)" ([templateC06.php?CID=633](#))

The election of Ehud Barak fueled expectations of speedy success in the peace process, on both the Palestinian-Israeli track and the Syrian/Lebanese-Israeli track. Yet while progress is likely, a final resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict is not.

Despite positive steps like the September 1999 Sharm el-Sheikh accord, the Israeli national "consensus" and the Palestinian national "consensus" still remain far apart on core issues (e.g., territory, Jerusalem, and refugees). In Syria, the key obstacle remains what it has been for years--the profound ambivalence of Syria's Hafiz al-Assad. Even as he tells visitors of his yearning for "peace" with Israel, he apparently fears such an agreement would force open Syria's closed society, weakening his iron-fisted control. This may be a higher price than he is willing to pay for the return of the Golan Heights.

The next half-decade is likely to see incremental progress--perhaps including the establishment of an internationally recognized Palestinian mini-state on territory within the West Bank and Gaza. But even this will probably not end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which will persist at various levels of intensity, tension, and violence. The forces of irredentism and rejection will also continue to harass the peacemakers and threaten to undermine what progress has been achieved.

The challenge for U.S. policy is to advance overall U.S. interests in a stable, peaceful, pro-West Levant by:

- pursuing steady, incremental progress while protecting against a backlash of unfulfilled expectations.
- lowering Palestinian and Syrian ambitions in order to heighten the prospect of near-term success.
- investing in Jordan, which is pivotal but vulnerable, and deepening trade links within a Jordanian-Palestinian-Israeli economic space.
- increasing people-to-people exchanges among erstwhile adversaries to inculcate a "culture of peace" in the region so that sterile government-to-government agreements can take root in a milieu of economic, educational, and social interaction among Arabs and Israelis.

While the United States is promoting these key policy goals, it is also very important that the vital elements of the U.S.-Israeli strategic relationship be insulated from ups and downs in the Arab-Israeli negotiations. Given common U.S. and Israeli regional threats--especially from terrorism and weapons of mass destruction--it is essential to build a firewall around this bilateral alliance. Only then can we focus our resources on moving the peace process forward. ❖

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