

To Achieve Mideast Peace, Suspend Disbelief

By DENNIS B. ROSS

THESE are hard times for trying to promote, much less make, peace between Palestinians and Israelis. The rise of political Islam, Syria's civil war and looming implosion, and the Iranian nuclear imbroglio not only dominate the environment, but they also render it forbidding for peacemaking. And while all these factors make Israelis and Palestinians reluctant to take risks for peace, they do not represent the biggest hurdle for ending the conflict. The most fundamental problem between Israelis and Palestinians is the problem of disbelief.

Most Israelis and Palestinians today simply don't believe that peace is possible. I won't rehearse all the reasons both sides have lost faith. Suffice it to say that Israelis feel that their withdrawal from territory (like southern Lebanon and the Gaza Strip) has not brought peace or security; instead, it has produced only violence. Why, then, should they repeat the same mistake and subject themselves to far greater, even existential, risk in the West Bank? Meanwhile, Palestinians believe that negotiations from 1993 onward failed to produce independence but instead yielded a huge Israeli settler presence in their midst.

Put simply, neither side believes that the other is committed to a two-state outcome: leaving aside Hamas's explicit rejection of the principle, Israelis are generally convinced that when the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, and his Fatah Party speak of two states, they do not mean Palestine and a Jewish state called Israel; they mean a Palestinian state and a binational state.

Likewise, Palestinians discount what Israelis say about two states and believe instead that the Israelis will never accept Palestinian independence. They ask, if Israel is truly committed to two states, why is it building settlements in what should be the Palestinian state?

Given this context of mutual disbelief, the idea that the two sides now will seize an initiative to end the conflict is an illusion. But that cannot be an argument for doing nothing. The longer the stalemate drags on, the greater the cynicism and the less anyone on either side will be able to speak of two states and retain any credibility.

If the two-state solution is discredited as an outcome, something and someone will surely fill the void. Already the Islamists of Hamas, with their rejection of two states, seem primed to do so. The moment Islamists come to define Palestinian identity is the moment when this conflict will be transformed from a national into a religious one — and at that point it may no longer be possible to resolve.

So what can be done? It is more important than ever to find ways to reinforce and sustain Mr. Abbas's Palestinian Authority. As important as that may be, it can't, by itself, change a dynamic that discredits peacemaking and the possibility of two states.

Reinvigorating that possibility — and giving the Israeli and Palestinian peoples a reason to take a second look at negotiations as the means to produce it — is vital. However, at this point, if negotiations resumed tomorrow, the two sides would largely talk past each other. They need an agenda for discussions that can actually generate changes that ordinary citizens on both sides could see and feel.

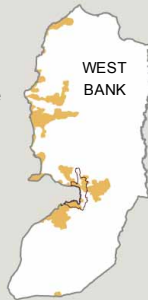
I propose a 14-point agenda for discussions. Twelve of the points — six on the Israeli side and six on the Palestinian side — would be coordinated unilateral moves that each party would be willing to discuss and implement provided that the other side would do its part. The final points would be mutual steps taken concurrently by both sides. The goal would be to chip away at the sources of each side's disbelief about the other's commitment to a genuine two-state solution.

What Israelis Can Do



Show That We Have No Intention of Expanding Into a Future Palestinian State

- 1 Declare that Israel **will build new housing only in settlement blocks** and in areas to the west of the security barrier. This means that Israel would build only in about 8 percent of the West Bank (yellow areas on map at right) and no longer in the remaining 92 percent.
- 2 Be prepared to **offer compensation** to any Israeli settler ready to relocate to Israel or to designated blocks.
- 3 Commit to **beginning the construction of housing** within Israel or the blocks for all those settlers ready to relocate.



What Palestinians Can Do



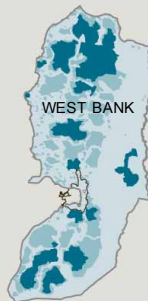
Show That We're Serious About Accepting Two States

- 1 **Be willing to speak of two states** for two peoples and to acknowledge there are two national movements and two national identities.
- 2 **Pledge to put Israel on Palestinian maps.** Today, most Palestinian maps don't show Israel at all (example at right). They do often show Israeli settlements in the West Bank.
- 3 Make clear the commitment to **building the state of Palestine**, without encroaching on Israel, with a particular focus on the rule of law.



Show That We're Serious About Ending Control Over Palestinians

- 4 In "**Area C**," which represents 60.1 percent of the West Bank's territory and in which Israel retains civil and security responsibility, Palestinians would be permitted economic access, activity and ownership.
- 5 In "**Area B**," which covers 21.7 percent of the West Bank and in which Palestinians have responsibility for civil affairs and for law and order — but not for dealing with terrorism — the presence of Palestinian police and security forces, and their duties, would be allowed to increase.
- 6 In "**Area A**," which accounts for 18.2 percent of the West Bank's territory and in which the Palestinians have civil and security responsibility, the Israel Defense Forces still carry out incursions for security reasons. Because these operations are a reminder of Israeli control and grate on the Palestinians, the I.D.F. could specify clear security criteria, which, if met by the Palestinian Authority, would end the incursions.



AREA A ■
AREA B ■
AREA C ■

Show That We're Going to Be Good Neighbors to Israel

- 4 **Commit to ending incitement**; stop glorifying as martyrs those who kill Israelis; stop blaming Israel for every evil; stop denying the Jewish connection to Jerusalem.
- 5 **Prepare the Palestinian public for peace**; Yasir Arafat used to speak about the "peace of the brave." Declare that the peace of the brave means that both sides, not only Israel, have hard decisions to make for peace.
- 6 Address the question that Mahmoud Abbas once posed: where does it say that Palestinians should live in squalid conditions? In the West Bank, this would mean **building permanent housing in refugee camps** and that those families who wished to move out of the camps would be permitted to do so. At right, children getting food in one of the camps.



What They Can Do Together



Two Crucial, Mutual Steps

7 **Commit to an exchange of classrooms** or regular youth exchanges starting as early as third grade. The complete absence of contact now means that children on each side are being socialized to demonize and dehumanize the other.

8 **Publicly acknowledge when the other side does something positive.** For example, the Israeli government should acknowledge that the Palestinian security forces do their job professionally and fulfill their obligations. And the Palestinian Authority should acknowledge when Israel has helped it meet its obligations by advancing tax revenues early, or that Jerusalem's Hadassah hospital treats Palestinians in need at no cost.

Starting a Virtuous Cycle

These 14 points represent an agenda for discussion that could lead to coordinated actions and change the dynamic between Israelis and Palestinians — and maybe, by restoring hope, show that the government of Mr. Abbas still offers a pathway for Palestinian national aspirations.

These points could, for once, create a virtuous cycle. Such progress is vital if there is to be any hope that the two sides will actually address the core issues of the conflict.

We don't need more dead ends. It is time to show Israelis and Palestinians that something is possible other than stalemate. Otherwise disbelief and failure will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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