



The End of the ‘Peace Process’?

By Tal Becker

For some time now, Israeli-Palestinian negotiations have had more to do with diplomatic talking points than with genuine progress toward agreement. The Quartet envoys (representing the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the UN secretary-general) continue their efforts to bring the parties back to the negotiating table. But few believe that they will succeed, and even fewer believe anything of significance could actually be achieved if they did. During January and early February 2012, tentative “preparatory” talks between Israeli and Palestinian representatives were held in Jordan after over a year of deadlock. The talks were suspended after five rounds,

however, and it is uncertain at the time of this writing whether they will be renewed. But much like the three years of diplomacy that preceded them, the talks in Jordan seem to have had more to do with each side trying to avoid blame for failure than with creating conditions for success. They have done little to alter the deeply pessimistic assessments of observers, or of the parties themselves.

If it is not dead, then the “peace process” lives on largely as pseudo-diplomatic theatre—it is a stage where the differences between the parties are acted out, not a framework for resolving them. Foreign leaders and diplomats may get tactical advantage by referring to some process that is still ongoing (a meeting here, a visit of a delegation there, a major speech somewhere else), but these are procedural masks for the lack of substantive progress, not evidence of it.

Against the backdrop of the 2011 Arab uprisings, the Palestinian UN initiative, deadlocked negotiations, Fatah-Hamas on-off “reconciliation” efforts, Israeli

and Palestinian domestic politics, the empowerment of extremists, the showdown with Iran, and much else, this state of affairs is, of course, no secret. It is common knowledge among most in that circle known as the “peace industry,” and it would be evident even to casual observers of Israeli-Palestinian relations.

Among supporters of an end-of-conflict agreement, this situation invites three principal reactions. The first is despair—a sense that, after so much effort and so many missed opportunities, the conflict is destined to deteriorate, the extremists will inevitably dictate the agenda, and, perhaps, the two-state vision is lost.

The second response is blame. So much ink has been (and will be) spilled on assigning responsibility for this predicament. Undoubtedly, thorough analysis of the structural flaws and faulty policies that may be responsible for this prolonged impasse is warranted. But, unfortunately, these efforts regularly descend into a dialogue of the deaf. Defects that are identified are taken not as lessons to be learned but as accusations to

be rebuffed. Too often, they are sermons to the converted; more related to propaganda than to finding a way forward.

The third response is fantasy. The idea that if only some missing element were found (a presidential speech, a map, a UN resolution, a meeting between the leaders, a peace conference), everything would turn around. Though disturbingly prevalent in diplomatic discussions, this approach does more than exhibit undue optimism about what can be achieved under present conditions. It fundamentally misunderstands the complexity of the conflict and the number of stars that need to be aligned to achieve real progress.

None of these three reactions—despair, blame, or fantasy—offers much relief for anyone who is serious about advancing the prospects of Israeli-Palestinian peace. In all the uncertainty that characterizes today's Middle East, one thing is certain: Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking is stuck. But getting it unstuck will require a good deal more than a new diplomatic initiative or some magical, as-yet-unarticulated mix of words.

If the Middle East is undergoing dramatic change, then it stands to reason that conventional thinking about Israeli-Palestinian peace may need to undergo change as well. To do this, it is not necessary to stray from the two-state model that still remains the most viable organizing framework for an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. But it is important to reexamine the conceptual infrastructure—the language and assumptions—that guides Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking and to see whether it has stood the test of time.

Rather than contribute another set of grand policy recommendations that will no doubt evaporate into the think tank ether, this Policy Note has a more limited objective. It aims to identify and challenge some of the accepted wisdoms that are common to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and the policy discussion that surrounds them. Doing so may help create space for new thinking about how to advance (or at least preserve) the option of a two-state outcome in a rapidly changing region. To set the stage, the paper will briefly consider the current state of play before turning to some of the assumptions that merit rethinking if a path to lasting coexistence is ever to be forged.

The State of Play

It seems exceedingly unlikely that 2012 will be a breakthrough year for Israeli-Palestinian peace. The key actors are too focused on other challenges, too skeptical of one another's intentions, and too limited by multiple constraints to engage in the kind of decision-making a peace agreement would require, even if they were inclined to do so.

The Palestinian leadership is pulled in numerous, conflicting directions. Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas, increasingly toying with resignation, flits unconvincingly between negotiations with Israel, accelerating the drive for Palestine's admission into the UN system, and a Fatah-Hamas reconciliation and elections deal. Even if the pressures of the Arab uprisings and the demands of Palestinian politics suggest that inaction on his part is unwise, taking any of these options to their natural conclusion requires decisions and sacrifices that seem particularly unappealing to him.

Like all of his Fatah colleagues, Abbas has no faith in the option of reaching a feasible peace agreement with the current Israeli government. But, perhaps more important, the regional situation and the deadly dynamics of the internal Palestinian scene make this a decidedly unpalatable alternative. In an era of popular uprisings, he can ill-afford unpopular compromises with Israel or credible accusations by Hamas—emboldened by the Islamist surge in the region and the Gilad Shalit prisoner-exchange deal—that he is not committed to Palestinian reconciliation. His position is further complicated by a sense, considered common on the Palestinian street, that the state-building project has hit a glass ceiling—that the PA is making the occupation more manageable for Israel rather than paving the way to Palestinian sovereignty.

Still, Abbas remains reluctant to pay the price for turning his back definitively on the negotiation option and being seen as fully embracing Hamas or the UN road. This is less tied to his principled preference for a negotiated settlement than to the consequences of such a move in terms of potential Israeli and U.S. retaliation (especially in economic terms), as well as to the challenges such retaliation could pose to his legacy and his capacity for an honorable exit. The result is a PA

leadership that seems torn by indecision and even more tentative and confounded by circumstances than usual.

For Israel, the Palestinian issue has drifted considerably from center stage. Much of the country’s attention is focused on the increasingly acute situation with Iran and the debate over options for confronting it. Indeed, this is likely to become the burning foreign policy issue for Israel as the year progresses. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s remaining energy has been largely devoted to divisive and weighty domestic issues, as well as to the gradual buildup to national elections.

Even if Netanyahu wanted to make a genuine drive for a peace agreement, his present coalition seems, to many observers, ill-suited to the task. But this is not a major concern. For many in the Israeli political establishment and on the street, the uncertainty created by the Arab uprisings (especially with the rise of Islamist forces) and the lack of faith in the Palestinian side have rendered negotiations an issue of secondary significance. It remains important to ensure that Israel not be seen as the obstacle to an agreement, but this has little relationship to a belief in the feasibility of actually reaching one in the present environment.

For the United States and other relevant international and regional actors, there are simply more pressing domestic and international issues than the relentless and exasperating search for Israeli-Palestinian peace. Even on the regional agenda, the situations in Iran and Syria, not to mention Egypt, are of substantially more urgent concern. Washington and other actors might be inclined to expand their priorities and attention were the parties to signal that something serious was afoot, but in the absence of that it is difficult to justify major investment in this issue.

In this environment, while the Quartet envoys remain rhetorically committed to a peace agreement, they are more focused on contributing, as best they can, to limiting the damage and stabilizing the situation. Current efforts to sustain the Quartet-sponsored exploratory talks in Jordan (including cobbling together a package of confidence-building measures) are more linked to this objective than to any hope of real progress.

All of these trends, coupled with demographic and political projections, are mutually reinforcing and have produced what appears, for now at least, to be an insurmountable impasse. Barring unexpected developments,

even optimistic observers see the present deadlock persisting at least until some time after this year’s U.S. elections. The aftermath of confrontation with Iran or some other major crisis, as well as changes in leadership, could conceivably alter this dynamic. But the current landscape has created an atmosphere that is ripe for pronouncements that the “peace process” is dead, as well as the opportunity to reconsider the way in which it is conceived.

Revisiting Assumptions

Numerous core assumptions and axioms about Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking have become so ingrained, so familiar a part of the discourse, that they are rarely questioned. The Israeli term for this is *konceptsia* (from the English “concept”), based on the country’s experience during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when Israeli military planners and decision-makers were so locked into a conceptual paradigm that they were unable to adequately predict and prepare for the impending Egyptian attack.

Indeed, it is striking that while talk of change in the Middle East abounds, there is little change in the rhetoric and ideas—in the *konceptsia*—that accompany Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts. The vast majority of the policy analysis and decision-making surrounding the “peace process” takes place within the tired confines of a fixed range of conceptual constructs.

In part, this may be because there is little demand to alter the vocabulary and models of a process in which many, on both sides, have lost both faith and interest. But it is nevertheless unfortunate because this *konceptsia* tends to shape policymakers’ attitudes, as well as their assessments of the options before them. Analysis becomes ossified, and even “outside the box” policy recommendations tend to take the form of repeating the mistake that the parties least remember making.

The number of assumptions and positions that fall into this category is considerable. Below are several that are often heard by the parties or other involved actors and deserve attention and review.

“We have been negotiating for twenty years.”

The idea that the parties have been actively trying to resolve the conflict for two decades (beginning from the 1991 Madrid talks) is heard very often from Israeli and Palestinian interlocutors, as well as third parties engaged

in the process. It is generally invoked with a sense of hopelessness—as evidence that the conflict may simply not be susceptible to resolution given that such sustained efforts have not produced a peace agreement.

It is mistaken. The fact is that for most of the past twenty years, the parties have been engaged not in good-faith peace negotiations to end the conflict, but in arguments as to why they are not negotiating. For significant periods, they were either engaged in armed confrontation of varying intensity or coping with its aftermath. Even when negotiations were intensively underway, they dealt largely with interim arrangements and day-to-day challenges, not with end-game issues.

In essence, there have been two official, substantive rounds of permanent-status negotiations: in the context of the Camp David summit of 2000 through the Taba talks in early 2001, and in the Annapolis process from December 2007 until the lead-up to the Gaza war in late 2008. Beyond that, efforts since 2009 to launch negotiations between Netanyahu and Abbas have failed to produce meaningful high-level talks, other than the short-lived (and largely ceremonial) meetings of September 2010.

Even when final-status negotiations were underway, some issues—notably territory and security—received considerable attention while many issues critical to agreement (arrangements in Jerusalem, border regime management, trade relations, refugee compensation, and much more) remained largely unexplored between official negotiators beyond the level of general principle. In all, the actual time devoted to in-depth dialogue on the full range of issues in dispute, as opposed to preparatory phases and gamesmanship, has been relatively limited and, when undertaken, actually produced at least some bursts of progress.

Opinion naturally differs as to how serious and professional these negotiating rounds were, but they clearly make up only a fraction of the twenty years since the “peace process” began. This is not a technicality—it directly challenges the argument that since the parties have tried exhaustively to reach an agreement and failed, the effort should be abandoned.

Naturally, there is no guarantee that additional negotiations would result in an agreement, certainly not under present conditions. But the idea that this option has been exhausted is misleading. The narrative

that the parties have twice stood on the verge of complete agreement, only to have the talks collapse, is also simplistic. These accounts are too generous in their assessment of the thoroughness of previous negotiating rounds, and not generous enough in assessing the potential room for progress in future rounds, under appropriate circumstances.

Some may argue that the parties’ difficulty in getting to substantive negotiations is itself evidence that they could not possibly achieve results if they ever got to the table again. This position too is unfair. The calculations and posturing of negotiating parties before they reach the table regularly differ from those in play when talks are underway, especially if they sense a viable agreement is in reach. Leaders on both sides are almost always cautious not to give too much away before a deal is struck, and are reluctant to take the risks of peace-making unless there is real evidence of seriousness and reciprocity from the other side. The fact that the parties have not been able to reach this decision point may be evidence that it can never be reached, but it could also suggest that they have yet to properly exhaust the avenues for getting there.

The lesson here is one of recalibrating expectations and taking a longer view of the process of conflict resolution. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the most complicated and bitter on the planet, even if it is far from the most deadly. It requires sustained and intensive engagement, devoid of the expectation of a quick fix. Conflicts far less intricate, and lacking the explosive and singular mix of religion, politics, security, history, and identity, have taken far more than twenty years of serious negotiations to resolve. To mention one, the Cyprus conflict has endured multiple distinct peace initiatives without resolution. Twenty years of on-again, off-again Israeli-Palestinian negotiations is not in itself evidence that failure is guaranteed, even if it sometimes feels that way.

“Nothing has been achieved.”

This statement too, often heard in discussion of the peace process, is a common corollary to the idea that the parties have been engaged in fruitless negotiations for decades. The idea that we are no closer to the two-state model today than we were two decades ago is an attempt to indict the peace process as a whole as a failure.

While the process has had no shortage of horrible setbacks and mistakes, and while in many respects recent developments have made the achievement of a peace agreement much more difficult, this argument—like most dogmatic positions—is flawed. We need not deny the significant obstacles impeding the achievement of a lasting agreement in order to acknowledge progress in important areas. At a time of such negativity about the prospects of Israeli-Palestinian peace, it is appropriate to discuss examples of such progress:

Both societies have, to differing degrees, come to accept the logic and necessity of a two-state agreement. In this regard, a significant distance has been traveled when one considers that, before the process began, Palestinian statehood was opposed by all but the radical left in Israel, and the Palestine Liberation Organization refused to even recognize Israel’s right to exist. Indeed, Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush explicitly opposed a Palestinian state, and even the Oslo Accords did not assure that this was the goal of negotiations.

Today, while each society has to contend with opposition to this outcome, the leaders on both sides are committed to it, at least in principle, as are consistent majorities on both sides.¹ The vision of two states living side by side in peace and security has become the organizing principle that shapes Israeli, Palestinian, and international discourse on the conflict. Neither side necessarily, or consistently, conducts itself in accordance with this objective, and even the majorities supportive of this outcome seem reluctant to lobby actively for it. Nonetheless, neither side has chosen to officially discard the Oslo framework and its subsequent agreements despite many opportunities or pretexts to do so. The two-state model remains, regardless of its shortcomings, the accepted yardstick against which Israeli and Palestinian leaders are expected to explain or justify their policy.

Through the development of autonomy arrangements and subsequent state-building efforts under PA prime

minister Salam Fayad (with international support), the institutions and infrastructure of a functioning future Palestinian state are emerging, at least in the West Bank. Reports in recent years by bodies such as the UN, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank have gone so far as to assert that in key spheres the PA is ready to assume the responsibilities of statehood. Problems persist on issues such as movement and access, rule of law, education, and expansion of Palestinian authority into parts of Area C (i.e., the Israeli-administered portions of the West Bank). But there have been far-reaching improvements in fields such as health, security, social protection, economic growth, infrastructure, and overall governance.² This progress, even if fragile and reversible, has made the idea of Palestinian statehood alongside Israel a tangible prospect.

Both sides have, to differing degrees, confronted taboos that have long stood as obstacles to an acceptable agreement. For multiple reasons, progress on this front has been markedly more pronounced in Israeli than in Palestinian society. For example, ideas related to far-reaching territorial compromise or concessions in Jerusalem that were once unthinkable in Israel are now a common part of the debate, if not accepted as inevitable components of an agreement. Although such movement has been less noted and less notable among Palestinians, there have nevertheless been important shifts in their position as well (at least on the part of those Palestinians involved in the negotiations). These include, for example, acceptance of the concept of “territorial swaps” to allow for the annexation of some settlements into Israel, increased recognition of the need for a future Palestinian state to be demilitarized with accompanying security limitations, and, arguably, greater flexibility on the refugee issue as well.

In the eyes of each side, these steps are of course insufficient to approach what negotiators refer to as a “zone of possible agreement.” But they are nevertheless significant, and have helped create a situation in which many Israelis and Palestinians are becoming accustomed to the contours of a negotiated two-state deal.

1. While the poll numbers fluctuate and are sometimes contested, the general view is that the majority of Israelis and Palestinians support the two-state model. One relatively recent poll, for example, found that 71 percent of Israelis and 57 percent of Palestinians support it; see Harry S. Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace, “Majority of Palestinians and Israelis Prefer Two-State Solution over Binational State or Confederation,” press release, March 2010, <http://truman.huji.ac.il/poll-view.asp?id=325>.

2. See, for example, Office of the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, *Palestinian State-Building: An Achievement at Risk* (Report to the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, September 2011), <http://www.unsco.org/Documents/Special/UNSCOs%20Report%20to%20the%20AHLC%2018%20September%202011.pdf>.

Recent poll results present a mixed picture and are often debated, but they regularly highlight the willingness to compromise on both sides. One joint Israeli-Palestinian poll conducted in December 2011 found that 58 percent of Israelis and 50 percent of Palestinians favored a deal along the lines of the Clinton Parameters of December 2000, while 39 percent of Israelis and 49 percent of Palestinians opposed this outcome.³ At the same time, a majority on both sides assumed that the other side opposed such a settlement, and approximately two-thirds on both sides do not believe that such a final settlement is achievable under present conditions.

Indeed, public disenchantment is deep. Settlement construction, failed talks, the second intifada, shelling from Gaza even after Israeli disengagement, and numerous other issues have all taken their toll. Against this background of crushed hopes, much more will need to be invested in softening public opposition, familiarizing both societies with the likely features of a future agreement, and allaying some of the fears associated with it. Equally important is a sustained commitment to combating incitement and promoting coexistence and mutual understanding in the face of extremism. But precisely because the disappointments have been so severe, the fact that core constituencies on both sides remain supportive of an agreement, even in principle, is a source of encouragement that the public appeal of such an outcome can still be expanded and deepened over time.

In a variety of fields, Israeli-Palestinian cooperation has produced positive experiences for both sides and helped advance the idea that coexistence is possible. In areas such as water, environment, health, and tourism, there is a record of working together, even if partial and uneven. In recent years, cooperation has been most significant in the field of security in the West Bank. Through the program established by the Office of the U.S. Security Coordinator (USSC), and in cooperation with Jordan and several other states, PA security forces have been reformed, trained, and equipped in a way that has dramatically improved security in the West Bank and cooperation with the Israel Defense Forces. Several thousand professionally trained Palestinian

security personnel have provided a sense of law and order for Palestinians, helped significantly reduce terrorist incidents, and enabled Israel to shrink its security presence in the West Bank to its lowest level in well over a decade.⁴ Problems remain, and there are both Israeli and Palestinian critics of the program and new questions about its sustainability. But there has now been an extended period of close security cooperation that has made a critical contribution to the idea that meaningful Israeli-Palestinian security partnership is possible. Given the centrality of security to any peace agreement, the confidence and mutual respect engendered by this security cooperation should not be underestimated.

Years of Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic engagement have produced a small but nonetheless distinct cadre of negotiators and policymakers from each side who are familiar both with each other and with the issues in dispute. While some have been hardened by the experience, for others it has led to a reassessment of what is possible in a way that may help prepare the ground for agreement in the future.

A final development worth noting in this partial inventory relates to the regional picture. While elements of its content remain in dispute, it is difficult to deny the landmark significance of the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 in endorsing a two-state outcome, and the normalization of relations with Israel in the context of a comprehensive peace agreement. Much that has happened in the region, as well as the upheavals currently underway, serve to diminish or raise questions about the impact of this initiative, certainly in Israeli eyes; but this should not deny it a place on the positive side of the ledger.

The argument that nothing has been achieved also fails to take account of the benefits to both sides of having a diplomatic framework in place, or the costs that might have been endured in its absence. Under the diplomatic umbrella of the peace process, both sides were able to improve their international standing, deepen their relations with key countries, and minimize conflict by anchoring their policies in a diplomatic process, even if it failed to produce an agreement.

3. See "Increase in Palestinians' and Israelis' Willingness to Compromise amidst Climate of Feud and Mistrust," press release (Harry S. Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace, December 2011), <http://truman.huji.ac.il/poll-view.asp?id=423>.

4. See, for example, Anshel Pfeffer, "West Bank Sees Lowest IDF Troop Levels since First Intifada," *Haaretz*, November 28, 2010, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/west-bank-sees-lowest-idf-troop-levels-since-first-intifada-1.327262>.

Amid all the negative rhetoric surrounding Israeli-Palestinian relations, it is easy to lose sight of what has been achieved. But doing so is more than a disservice to those who have made genuine strides toward coexistence. It unjustifiably shapes a mindset that conflict is inevitable, and that nothing is to be gained by pursuing new avenues that could advance the prospects of peace.

“Just get to the damn table.”

These words, uttered by U.S. secretary of defense Leon Panetta at the December 2011 Saban Forum in Washington, speak to the frustration of so many with the excruciating difficulty involved in getting the parties into the negotiating room.⁵ More significantly, they betray a widely held assumption that conducting negotiations, regardless of context or timing, is the key to success. When put simply, the sentiment implies a belief that something magical will happen from the mere fact that the two parties are staring at each other across a table. When put in more persuasive fashion, the argument is, in the words of Prime Minister Netanyahu, “You can only end a negotiation for peace if you begin it.”⁶

As mentioned above, there can be clear benefits, at least in tactical terms, to conducting negotiations even in the absence of a positive outcome. International actors, no less than the parties themselves, are often eager to have some diplomatic process that they can point to as a source of potential promise. It is also true that opportunities can open up through dialogue that can seem impossible before the parties enter the room.

But negotiations are not a cost-free enterprise. Entering a negotiating process that is framed as a formal attempt to resolve the conflict can have dire consequences when one or both of the parties are not committed to it, or when conditions are not ripe for progress. Failure, or even the sense that the parties are just treading water, further erodes the credibility of peace as an option. As was the case after the 2000 Camp David talks, if the result of negotiations is to cement the idea

that talking is useless, the appeal of extremists and the risk of violence often increase.

In light of the prevailing atmosphere of uncertainty and deep mutual distrust, there is room to debate the wisdom of pushing for official endgame negotiations. The Quartet seems committed to such talks, but it is probably untenable from a political perspective for it to be seen as endorsing any other position. Still, it is worth considering whether at least part of the diplomatic energy devoted to returning the parties to the “damn table” may be used more effectively to invest in other processes, some perhaps longer-term, that could help create conditions riper for serious formal negotiations and agreement.

A common counterargument to the focus on these kinds of activities is that without the “political horizon” provided by an intensive negotiating process, it is unlikely that actions outside the negotiating table can be sustained. There is certainly merit to this argument, but the situation is hardly remedied by a negotiating process that is not regarded as credible. The point here is not to argue for a “bottom-up” or “top-down” approach, or even to suggest that a choice needs to be made between them. Rather, it is to prefer genuine, even if limited, measures over the illusion of progress. It is to focus at every level (negotiations, civil society, state-building, and more) on what can practically and consistently be done to set the stage for peace and to sideline or co-opt its opponents, rather than pursue ceremonies, convene gatherings, and set artificial deadlines that promise radical transformation and repeatedly disappoint.

There is a broader point raised by the focus on official negotiations, one that concerns the tendency to confuse means and ends when it comes to a peace agreement. For too many involved in the process, negotiating an agreement has become an objective in itself, rather than a tool for achieving the desired outcome. After all, what is important is not the piece of paper that is signed, but the reality that the piece of paper may potentially produce.

Ideally, of course, a comprehensive agreement that resolved all issues in dispute and laid the groundwork for implementing a new two-state reality offers the best framework for resolving the conflict. But few believe that option is currently available. If the vision can be better advanced at the moment by other means, there

5. For a full transcript of his remarks, see U.S. Department of Defense, “Remarks by Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta at the Saban Center,” December 2, 2011, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4937>.

6. Transcript: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Interview with ABC’s David Muir, Sept. 23, 2011, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2011/09/transcript-israeli-prime-minister-benjamin-netanyahu-interview-with-abc-news-anchor-david-muir/>

is nothing that compels exclusive adherence to the conventional model of negotiations when conditions do not allow for it.

Many of the diplomats and lawyers engaged in the peace process, for whom words are the tools of the trade, have a natural inclination to focus their attention on the exercise of drafting documents, joint statements, and the like. In the appropriate context, words are of course critically important to creating the mindset necessary for change. But, arguably the truer progress toward a two-state outcome has emerged, in recent years at least, not from legal formulations, but from less-official channels of communication and the practical impact of security cooperation and state-building.

In fact, much of the recent wrangling over words—which consumes so much time and energy—has involved diplomatic documents of little if any significance and has not advanced genuine agreement between the parties. Too much seems to have been neglected or sacrificed by fighting over symbolic words and overly prioritizing the attempt to persuade reluctant parties to enter a rigid negotiating process that is so unlikely, under present conditions, to produce a successful result.

“If only...”

A close cousin of the automatic belief that no time is the wrong time for negotiations is the idea that there is but one missing element to achieving peace. This is an arena where the political need for simplicity and quick results clashes with the conflict’s infuriating complexity. So many speeches and articles on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict tend toward oversimplification and focus on one ingredient considered singularly indispensable to an agreement. For some—including, it seems, the Obama administration when it first came to office—it is a settlement freeze or intensive U.S. engagement in the negotiating process. For others, it is an end to terrorism and incitement, or Arab endorsement, or agreed terms of reference; the list goes on.

The very fact that the potential list of components considered necessary for a successful outcome is so long suggests its own conclusion regarding this “if only” pathology. The conflict is just too complex, the moving pieces too numerous, for these kinds of policy approaches. In truth, a multiplicity of factors—some

outside the protagonists’ control—will always need to be satisfied to give negotiations a realistic chance.

It is, of course, both naive and dangerous to simply wait for the perfect conditions to emerge. But it is no less unhelpful to build a peace process policy around a single condition when what is needed is sophisticated and consistent choreography across the board designed to ensure that as many elements as possible are pushing in a positive direction.

Having said that, one element is perhaps truly indispensable: two leaders genuinely committed to achieving an agreement and equipped with the skills to navigate the landmines that stand in the way of its advancement. No amount of U.S. engagement, UN resolutions, or Quartet statements is a substitute for this. And while the commitment of Israeli and Palestinian leaders is not in itself a guarantee of success, it is almost impossible to imagine meaningful success without it.

“Everybody knows what an agreement looks like.”

There is a common and at least partly misleading conception that the contours of a deal are well known and what is lacking is the political will to sign on to it. The image portrayed is of an imminent deal, if only we could get the pen into the leaders’ hands. This assertion is partly correct if it refers to relatively general principles on the core issues of the conflict. But it is greatly overstated if it refers to a comprehensive agreement that would be, at present, politically acceptable to both sides and sufficiently detailed as to be capable of being implemented in practice.

It is perhaps more accurate to say that everyone knows what the headlines of an agreement sound like. In reality, the work that remains to translate broad notions into a blueprint for action is substantial, and ironing out the details of an agreement is not (as many assume) a mere technicality. The capacity of Israeli and Palestinian leaders to sell the agreement to their respective publics, and to move quickly toward implementation, requires a common understanding of how the agreement will be realized, and of the extent to which people’s lives will be affected (negatively and positively) by it.

In the past, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators have tended toward “constructively” ambiguous formulations that spared their political patrons overly difficult or politically dangerous decisions. Signed papers have often

been confused with real progress. But this ambiguity has a destructive quality as well, in that it allows misunderstandings between the sides to be perpetuated and sows the seed for future conflict. Each side can sign onto a document but maintain and entrench its own interpretation of its terms in a way that makes actual progress on the ground more difficult.

An agreement that seeks to genuinely end the conflict cannot afford this kind of uncertainty. The lines need to be clear, the decisions required of both sides generally unambiguous. As a result, it is necessary to pay significant attention not merely to the principles of an agreement, but to its details. At present, even when negotiators use common terms such as “detailed security arrangements” or “compensation mechanism for refugees,” they can have widely differing assumptions of what these terms mean.

In short, one-sentence principles can obscure more than they reveal about the areas of agreement and disagreement between the parties. They are simply no substitute for detailed parameters that guarantee that a range of central concerns have been addressed. And while several “Track II” initiatives, such as the unofficial 2003 “Geneva Accord,” have addressed some of these issues in detail, in many respects they cannot take the place of negotiations at the official level, where political considerations and questions of feasibility weigh much more heavily.

None of this means that an implementable permanent-status agreement cannot be reached at some stage. Indeed, the experience and errors of the past may help build a foundation that can assist future negotiators. But the task is far more difficult than is often assumed, and is not simply limited to mustering the necessary political will. Expectations need to be adjusted about both the actual work still required to reach an agreement and the kind of agreement, with the right interplay between principles and details, that should be pursued if the two-state model is to be more than a slogan.

“Peace as pain” and “peace as utopia”

Israeli and Palestinian discourse regarding the notion of peace is striking in that it suffers from two almost contradictory tendencies. The first places attention on how painful a peace agreement will be. Its basic assumption is that the key to an agreement is a trade-off between

core issues. Many conceptualize that a peace agreement boils down to a bargain by which Israel concedes on Jerusalem and the Palestinians concede on refugees. This is sometimes described as a trade-off between 1967 issues (i.e., territorial compromise), on which Israel is expected to yield, and 1948 “narrative” issues (i.e., the “right” of return), where the Palestinians are expected to forgo their claim and recognize the legitimacy of Jewish self-determination.

There is truth to this assumption—both sides will have to yield—but it is arguably the wrong way to frame a deal and probably unhelpful as a tool for explaining the agreement to key constituencies. The concept of tradeoffs fails to accurately reflect how each and every core issue in dispute is emotionally laden and central to the security and/or national identity of each party. It does not seem viable for either leader to tell his constituents that he sold out on Jerusalem or refugees, respectively, for the sake of an agreement.

The agreement will no doubt demand difficult concessions from Israelis and Palestinians, but it may be better to try to envisage how, on balance, each side can build a plausible case as to why they improved their interests on every issue in dispute. International actors, and those Israelis and Palestinians committed to an agreement, need to do more to shape the discourse around the core issues in a way that makes an agreement sound more like a declaration of victory than a concession speech.

This is a difficult, but not insurmountable, task. To give one example, the discourse of peace advocates on Jerusalem routinely, and almost exclusively, refers to Israel’s need to “give up” its control of key sections of the city as part of an agreement. Not enough attention is given to the way an agreement might enable an Israeli leader to finally deliver international recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and guarantee lasting, uncontested Jewish control over key sites sacred to Judaism. This could involve more than merely reframing the way the Jerusalem issue is articulated, such as the development of ideas for upgrading the city as the capital in ways that would resonate positively for Israeli citizens.

On the refugee issue, to take another example, the challenge is more daunting but still worth the investment. The focus could be less on the need for

Palestinians to waive the claimed right of return, and more on the opportunity for refugees to finally have a Palestinian state of their own they can call home, as well as recognition of their suffering and appropriate redress for their losses. The language used and mechanisms adopted on refugees, as on other core issues, can shift more to what is to be gained by an agreement than what is to be abandoned because of it.

This is a specific articulation of a more general principle. When the discourse around peace focuses too much on “painful compromises” or the “dreams that need to be forsaken,” it makes the idea of an agreement sound like a bitter pill rather than a coveted prize. It assumes that the parties have amassed assets, the fruits of which they currently enjoy, which they will squander in return for an uncertain and fragile outcome. The result is that advocates of a peace agreement can easily be portrayed by their domestic opponents as less patriotic, less rooted in their national claims, and more willing to concede key national assets.

Those committed to a two-state deal need to focus more on articulating why an agreement is a way to protect or advance core national objectives, not concede them. This involves reminding Israelis and Palestinians that some so-called “concessions” relate to assets that exist in theory only, or over which their hold—in the absence of an agreement—is steadily eroding. But it also involves making the positive case for an agreement in terms of the benefits it brings, not just the dangers and threats it seeks to avoid.

At the same time, there is a second, conflicting tendency among some to speak of peace in utopian terms that do not match the dangers and uncertainty of the Middle East. Peace is sometimes offered as a kind of romantic ideal, evoking a vision that, for the foreseeable future, just may not be within reach.

In this sense, some Israeli and Palestinian leaders fall into the trap of promising their people a result they cannot deliver and then becoming reluctant to come to them with anything short of it. In these circumstances, they calculate that they are better served explaining why an agreement is unreachable because of the other side’s intransigence than contending with the disillusionment likely to arise from what actually can be reached.

In the current environment, the idea that an agreement on paper, however well-crafted, will usher

in some utopian era in practice seems fanciful. Israelis and Palestinians are too jaded by experience for this kind of hopeful rhetoric. If there is a case to be made for an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, it is unfortunately not because it would produce anytime soon the “New Middle East” of which Israeli president Shimon Peres once dreamed. It can only be because—assuming the right agreement can be reached—it offers a chance for a reality, and a future, for Israelis and Palestinians better than the one we know.

In fact, most “peace agreements” do not really establish peace in its broader sense. They do not try to reconcile grand historical narratives or produce deep bonds of friendship and cooperation between erstwhile warring peoples. Generally, they are technical documents. They focus on things like the redeployment of troops, the composition of constituent assemblies, or the demarcation of a border. Even when done right, they tend to be less like exhilarating marriage ceremonies than unsatisfying divorce agreements, where bitter and scarred parents try, against odds, to make things less painful for their children.

When leaders speak of peace in too grand and idealistic a way, they place too much weight on these negotiated agreements, and on the shoulders of the negotiators themselves. Even at best, an Israeli-Palestinian agreement would not create peace, but rather the space for peace to grow. It could create a framework for the real potential engineers of peace—the teachers, the parents, the spiritual leaders, the businesspeople, the children—to fashion a new reality and mindset over time, and for the extremists to gradually become unappealing and marginalized.

It is, of course, difficult for political leaders to speak about the risks and demands of a negotiated agreement in this way. Even if they are convinced of the merits of a suboptimal agreement, it is hardly popular to speak of a peace agreement in these more guarded and subdued terms.

The challenge is to move away from a language of peace that is so pain-focused that the agreement is rendered undesirable, or so idealistically minded that it is rendered impractical. A viable peace agreement is one that can be cast as a net advance in the interests and values of key constituencies on both sides, without promising an unreachable outcome. Put another way,

advocates of peace need to develop a vocabulary that not only makes the disenchanted publics on both sides believe in the promise of “peace” again, but also makes the kind of “peace” on offer believable.

The Role of Religion

One of the greatest shortcomings of the Oslo process was its assumption about the role of religion in Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking. Negotiations were a secular exercise, and peace was conceived in largely secular terms as a Western-style “split the difference” compromise. The assumption seemed to be that a deal would be reached by secular figures from both sides, and that the religious leaders and their followers would either acquiesce or be overrun.

It did not work out that way. Religion is a profoundly important dimension of both Palestinian and Israeli society and across the region. It is a central, inextricable component of the identity of major constituencies and powerbrokers on both sides. The rise of Islamists in Palestinian society, as in the broader Middle East, and the power of religious parties in Israel are a testament to this fact. The idea that these forces, as well as Muslims, Christians, and Jews around the world, would not be deeply affected by the theological and practical implications of a peace agreement, and could simply be overwhelmed, has been a significant miscalculation.

It seems clear that the religious forces, both in Israeli and Palestinian society, can no longer be taken for granted. They have done far more to shape developments and prevent outcomes they deem objectionable than their secular counterparts care to acknowledge. But remedying this flaw in Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking is not, at least initially, about more “interfaith dialogue.” This exercise, which has accompanied negotiations to one degree or another, has generally involved only marginal religious figures from each side, with little impact on mainstream theological attitudes toward a peace agreement or on the actual conduct and content of negotiations.

The task for leaders within each community is to engage in genuine dialogue about peace with leading spiritual figures. It is to challenge them to develop their own theology of peace, and to attempt to distinguish those respected religious leaders who cannot be reconciled to the idea of coexistence from those whose concerns and sensibilities can be addressed.

A peace agreement cannot be about the fate of Jerusalem and the future borders of the Holy Land without somehow being about God as well. Negotiators must understand and show extreme sensitivity to the concerns of believing Muslims, Christians, and Jews. They must seek to place an agreement in a meaningful theological context, not just a security or policy one.

This is a process very much in its infancy in both Israeli and Palestinian society, and its outcome is far from guaranteed. It requires a significant degree of openness and a familiarity with religious texts and doctrine that few involved in peace efforts typically have. But ignoring authentic religious voices seems no longer to be an option. Either a peace agreement can be recast in a way that carries spiritual significance for core religious audiences, or it may not be reached at all.

The Role of Regional Actors

The uncertain and rapidly changing regional environment requires revisiting a number of assumptions about the role of regional actors in Israel-Palestinian peace efforts. One of the core lessons of the 2000 Camp David talks concerns the importance of the involvement of regional Arab states in providing legitimacy and support for Palestinian reconciliation with Israel. Any Palestinian leader who pursues a peace deal with Israel is sure to be accused of betraying the Palestinian cause by a variety of extremist forces. In this context, Arab states have a crucial role to play in providing Palestinian negotiators with the political cover they need to reach an agreement, and in marginalizing its extremist opponents.

As the peace process progressed, efforts were invested intermittently in attracting regional support for an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal. The 2002 Arab Peace Initiative probably represents the high-water mark of regional engagement. As mentioned above, the historic significance of this initiative should not be diminished, since it represented a sea change from the Arab League’s notorious “three nos” issued in the 1967 Khartoum Resolution—no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with Israel.

However, it has never been entirely clear whether the initiative was seen by its proponents as a dictate for the outcome of the negotiations—that had the effect of limiting Abbas’s maneuverability—or a mechanism to legitimize them. Unfortunately, the initiative did not

signal willingness on the Arab side to genuinely support, politically or materially, the Palestinian state-building effort, to aggressively confront extremists, or to give Abu Mazen direct support for concrete concessions, let alone begin the process of normalization with Israel.

If the necessary regional backing was difficult to attain before the Arab uprisings of 2011, it seems even more in doubt today. Emerging Islamist powers, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, have long harbored radical views against coexistence with Israel. And those Arab regimes that cling to power may be especially reluctant to support unpopular Palestinian compromises at a time of such volatility. They are unlikely today to endorse positions that may invite public outrage and expose them to the ire of a potentially ascendant Iran or their own extremist forces.

In the emerging Middle East, concerns about waning U.S. power, the acute focus on internal troubles, the Iranian threat, and the fundamental fragility of many Arab regimes have intensified the allergy to risk-taking for peace. The result has been that even those Palestinian leaders who may be inclined toward agreement with Israel have felt not only the pressure of potential internal unrest, but also their increasing isolation in the Arab world and a corresponding reluctance to adopt a conciliatory posture. And many Israeli leaders, looking out at a region in turmoil, have found it hard to convince themselves, let alone their public, that now is the time for peacemaking.

While much is still in flux, it is certainly reasonable to assume that the mounting power of Islamist forces in numerous Arab countries and Iran's drive for nuclear weapons will harden regional hostility toward Israel and reluctance to support Israeli-Palestinian peace. Many hoped that the Arab awakening would herald a new, more promising, moment in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. At least in the immediate term, however, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Middle East has become less not more hospitable to peace.

Having said that, it remains self-defeating to treat this scenario as a foregone conclusion. A Middle East policy that is serious about preserving, and eventually reaching, the goal of Israeli-Palestinian peace must always ask itself how to confront and weaken these extremist tendencies and empower more pragmatic forces. Even today, Israeli, Palestinian, and international

actors committed to Israeli-Palestinian peace must focus on how to create, or at least encourage, a reality more conducive to a two-state outcome and more difficult for extremists to undermine.

The confrontation with Iran, for example, needs to be seen not only in the context of preventing the dire menace of Iranian nuclear weapons or undermining the regime's destabilizing effect across the region, but also in relation to the opportunities that may emerge if the shadow cast by Tehran were not as dark or far-reaching. The outcome of the showdown with Iran remains uncertain, but as sanctions intensify and the prospect of military action becomes more credible, fissures have begun to appear in the Iranian edifice. The regime's support for Bashar al-Assad as he kills thousands of Syrian civilians, coupled with the Sunni and Arab awakening across the region, has greatly harmed both Iran's regional standing and its self-righteous narrative. It no longer feels far-fetched to imagine Iran setback regionally or capitulating in some form, and this has been reflected in an increased willingness from traditionally hesitant Arab states, particularly in the Persian Gulf, to stand up to Tehran.

Attention should be given to the implications for Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts of a scenario in which the Iranian regime is successfully, even if partially, defanged. In the same way that the 1991 Gulf War helped produce the Madrid process, it is not inconceivable that the regional picture in the aftermath of a confrontation with Iran might allow, or perhaps necessitate, a renewed drive for Israeli-Palestinian agreement. A strategic view of the region requires more than warning about the devastating impact of Iran's ambitions materializing. It requires both effective measures directed at avoiding that outcome and serious planning to minimize the risks and capitalize on the potential opportunities that might emerge in the event of an Iranian retreat.

The empowerment of Islamist forces represents another challenge to the efforts to harness regional support for Israeli-Palestinian peace. Conventional wisdom rightly suggests that tradition and ideology will pull Islamists in the direction of maintaining a hostile posture toward such reconciliation. Fear of criticism from more radical Islamist actors such as the Salafists, and the kinship Islamists feel for their fellow Palestinian "Ikhwan" in Hamas, are likely to strengthen this trend. As

examples from Gaza, Iran, and Lebanon attest, there is nothing in electoral participation alone, or in the responsibilities of governance, that guarantee the Muslim Brotherhood will moderate. But there are forces that can help encourage the Islamists in this direction, especially if the international community is able to use its leverage wisely.

The capacity of Islamists to contend with urgent economic and governance challenges will depend, in part, on international support, in terms of direct aid (such as the \$1.3 billion the United States provides annually to Egypt), investment, trade, tourism, and assistance from international financial institutions. Islamists may seek refuge in a more-militant, anti-Western nationalism to excuse their shortcomings in meeting the expectations of their people. But in the wake of the Arab uprisings, it may be less tenable for Arab regimes to resort to the traditional tactic of blaming internal problems on Israel or the West. A policy of confrontation toward Israel, including tolerance or support for terrorist groups, is not likely to help emerging Arab governments deal with their immense internal problems or placate their restive populations eager for solutions that meet their basic needs.

In this context, as Robert Satloff and Eric Trager have argued, the international community can signal to emerging Islamist leaders that support—both direct and indirect—will depend on demonstrated moderation both in domestic and foreign policy.⁷ In the case of Egypt, this would include intense efforts to restore Cairo’s sovereignty and control over the Sinai Peninsula, from which terrorists are increasingly intent on targeting Israel. Equally important would be international insistence on continued commitment to the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty. Were the Muslim Brotherhood to find itself having to rationalize, in theological and political terms, the perpetuation of that treaty, it could elevate the notion of coexistence with Israel across the region, and in the Palestinian arena in particular. Such a development could have important ripple effects on Hamas, which—while unlikely to change its ideological position—seems for the moment to be internally conflicted over the potential merits of being seen as transitioning

from a “resistance” movement into a more respectable political entity on the regional scene.

For the longer term, the international community will need to work diligently to protect and invest in democracy, pluralism, and minority rights across the region. This will be critical to the development of entrenched democratic institutions and political alternatives that can challenge or temper Islamist influence in a way that will hopefully be more conducive to regional support for peace.

There may also be measures that Israel can take to support these more moderate tendencies. One possibility is to immediately pursue the restoration of relations with Islamist-led Turkey so as to create and legitimize a model of Islamist engagement and diplomatic ties with the Jewish state. There is no guarantee that Turkish-Israeli rapprochement is currently achievable. But such a development seems worth the effort given the strategic significance of Israeli-Turkish ties, both for their own sake and in the specific context of the regional Islamist awakening.

For similar strategic reasons, Israel has an interest in stabilizing and improving relations with the Palestinian side, including the exploration of ways to further support responsible Palestinian state-building. This is especially important given the unpredictable risk and consequences of violence erupting in the Palestinian arena. Beyond Israel’s vested interest in accountable and functioning Palestinian governance, it will be important at this fragile juncture to illustrate the positive results of Israeli-Palestinian cooperation and avoid an escalation that Islamist forces may use as a pretext to justify and cement their opposition to a peace agreement.

In more general terms, as power is reconfigured across the Middle East, traditional hostility toward Palestinian accommodation with Israel, even if likely, should not be assumed. The short-term prognosis is indeed bleak. But movement in the Middle East is never unidirectional. Actions produce reactions; trends produce countertrends. And those committed to Israeli-Palestinian peace have a responsibility to use the tools at their disposal to limit the impact and appeal of extremist forces and to constantly look for opportunities to sow the seeds of a Middle East more conducive to coexistence in the longer term.

7. Robert Satloff and Eric Trager, “How the U.S. Should Handle the Islamist Rise in Egypt,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 23, 2012, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC06.php?CID=1798>.

Conclusion: The End or the Beginning?

There is nothing inevitable about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Neither its resolution nor its continuation is preordained. Many speak with certainty that in the absence of a two-state solution, a one-state “solution” will soon become unavoidable. But foreign affairs defy these bright-line categorizations. For Israelis and Palestinians, it is no less likely that the conflict will just continue, in one form or another, without a definitive outcome or solution of any kind.

If the events of 2011 have taught us anything, it is a measure of humility in predicting regional developments. The deterministic language that shapes much of the discourse around Israeli-Palestinian relations—that declares peacemaking “dead,” for example—ignores the capacity of various actors to influence events, and the capacity of history to constantly surprise us with unexpected changes and new opportunities.

When all the rhetoric and analysis are swept aside, we are left with one powerful conclusion. There is no path to dignified Palestinian self-determination that does not involve some measure of respect and accommodation for Jewish self-determination. And, in equal measure, there is no path to lasting and secure Jewish self-determination without some measure of respect and accommodation for Palestinian self-determination. Neither people is going anywhere; neither is prepared to relinquish its collective identity or national aspirations.

When this conclusion is properly understood by enough Israelis and Palestinians, the fair realization of the other side’s interests can cease to be something to merely tolerate when necessary, and undermine when possible. Instead, each side can begin to appreciate that the other side’s claim to success in a peace agreement is critical to their own. Palestinian statehood (responsibly and realistically realized) can become an Israeli interest, not an Israeli compromise. Israeli security (in a way that demonstrates due respect for Palestinian sovereignty) can become a Palestinian interest, not a Palestinian concession.

Cultivating this kind of sentiment among both societies is a difficult endeavor. Its success is not guaranteed. But it remains possible if a deeper, longer, and broader view of the process of Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution is developed.

For too long, it seems, many involved in the peace process have been dealing with the region they want, not

the one they have. They have placed too much weight on whether the parties are at the negotiating table, and not enough on the process of creating the conditions conducive to those negotiations. Creating those conditions requires a more sober, less breathless attitude to Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking. It requires a rigor and seriousness that do not gel so easily with political timetables and sound bites. The points raised in this paper do not provide a policy blueprint, but they do suggest some lessons for the road ahead.

The first is in the realm of expectations. As frustrating as it may be to acknowledge, the road to true Israeli-Palestinian peace may still be quite long. The regular diplomatic assumption that such a peace is imminent if only the right policies were adopted may actually delay its arrival. The longer way may be the shorter way. This does not mean that key decisions should not be made. Israeli and Palestinians have a responsibility and a strategic interest to adopt policies that are consistent with, and accelerate, a two-state outcome. Some of these steps are dramatic and could be taken even today. But the expectation of a radical transformation in Israeli-Palestinian relations—of peace in its broader sense emerging quickly—produces more disappointment than hope.

The second lesson is in the sphere of vocabulary. Peace must be spoken of in ways that resonate with the constituencies that are needed to support it. This means revising the language that has become standard in the discourse of Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking. Advocates of peace need to reclaim their credentials as nationalists and patriots. They need to imagine how an agreement can be structured and explained so that it is meaningful and positive for constituencies to which they themselves may not belong. They need to speak of a two-state outcome not as an unavoidable concession to salvage what is possible of their national project, but as a national value and interest in itself.

The third lesson concerns policy. The choreography of a successful peace strategy is multifaceted and expansive. It demands a degree of relentlessness, nuance, and creativity that matches a conflict with so many moving parts. And it cannot hold efforts in one area hostage to progress in another. In this context, four arenas require devoted, parallel attention, and the manpower and resources to match:

- **Outside-in:** creating a regional environment supportive of Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking
- **Inside-out:** promoting civil society and grassroots support for a two-state deal
- **Bottom-up:** creating the reality of a functioning two-state model from the ground up
- **Top-down:** creating forums for meaningful dialogue to resolve the issues in dispute

None of these spheres of activity is new. None promises instant results in the current environment. But a steady, strategic, and unglamorous commitment to searching out avenues for genuine progress in each of them would be a welcome approach. It could mean, for example, that Palestinian state-building is seen as an objective in its own right rather than a concession for which reciprocity is required. It could mean producing an international incentives package for a peace agreement that begins to describe for Israelis and Palestinians the real-life benefits that peace might offer. It could mean pursuing less-rigid

and time-prescribed frameworks for genuine and open dialogue between official negotiators. It could mean crafting a series of messages and actions that both sides could undertake to reassure each other of their intentions, undo popular negative conceptions, and address open wounds. It could also mean engaging in discreet and carefully tailored planning on the international contribution to implementation of a future agreement. But, more than anything, it means exploring all of these options and more—constantly and unwaveringly, without too much fanfare or artificial deadlines, but with the belief that they will eventually produce a critical mass that favors peace.

Somewhere in the rubble of past failures lie lessons for the future. Somewhere in the vicissitudes and turmoil of today’s Middle East lie openings. Finding them, let alone agreeing on them, is a serious challenge. As the region undergoes uncertain and potentially seismic change, some may see cause to declare the “peace process,” as we know it, dead. But perhaps it is also an opportunity to begin the serious work of building something more authentic and promising in its place.

