

U.S. Must Build On Short-Term Steps in Israeli Peace Effort

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Commentary

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TEL AVIV--President Donald Trump's penchant for entwining reckless utterances and sound pronouncements was on vivid display at his joint White House press conference last month with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. It is still too early to determine which will predominate in administration policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But with Middle East envoy Jason Greenblatt having recently concluded his first trip to Israel in an official capacity and Israeli Ambassador Ron Dermer (pictured) having affirmed at AIPAC this week that "there is no daylight between our two governments," it is not too soon to adjust expectations to realities. Nothing significant has happened in the last year, including Trump's becoming president, to improve the chances of Israelis and Palestinians reaching a comprehensive peace agreement.

"The United States will encourage a peace and, really, a great peace deal. We'll be working on it very, very diligently," Trump stated in the East Room, as if his administration brought to the White House tools and know-how that will enable it to succeed where Presidents Obama, Bush, and Clinton failed.

"But it is the parties themselves who must directly negotiate such an agreement," said Trump, sensibly reversing course. "We'll be beside them; we'll be working with them." This emphasis on the parties' responsibility is refreshing. It repudiates the Obama administration's naive conviction that it could fashion for Israel and the Palestinian Authority a satisfactory resolution to the conflict that in face-to-face meetings they are unable to work out for themselves.

"So I'm looking at two-state and one-state, and I like the one that both parties like," Trump continued, seemingly unaware that Netanyahu has consistently affirmed that Israel's long-term goal is the creation of a Palestinian state capable of living in security and peace with the Jewish state.

"I'm very happy with the one that both parties like," the president added. "I can live with either one." Trump is right to favor the resolution that the two parties like rather than compel them to like the United States' preferred resolution. But contrary to Trump, the United States

cannot live with the consequences of a one-state solution, because Israel as we know it cannot live with them.

In practice, such a solution would require Israel—a country of approximately 8.6 million citizens, among whom are 1.8 million Arabs (20.8 percent)—to abandon its Jewish character by absorbing as full citizens around 2.5 million West Bank Palestinians. Or it would compel Israel to discard its liberal and democratic principles by denying millions of West Bank Palestinians over whom it would be exercising sovereignty the complete complement of civil and political rights. As for the fate of the Gaza Strip, where approximately 1.8 million Palestinians live under Hamas' theocratic rule, most one-state scenarios evade the additional fatal stumbling blocks.

It does not follow, however, that a two-state solution is presently attainable. “Inside the Black Box of Israeli-Palestinian Talks,” in the current issue of *The American Interest*, provides an Israeli veteran peace negotiator's account of the Obama administration's final effort in 2013-2014 to achieve it. The author, Michael Herzog, is a retired brigadier general in the Israel Defense Forces and a man of the center left. He strongly supports a two-state solution and desperately wanted Secretary of State John Kerry to succeed. But in measured language, Herzog reveals that even if Kerry had mastered the complexities of Israeli and Palestinian politics—which he failed to do—a final agreement was exceedingly elusive if not entirely out of reach.

According to Herzog, the secretary of state wrongly believed that his good intentions and tireless efforts could overcome the parties' mutual distrust. Kerry exacerbated that distrust by withholding key information from each side about the other's intentions. But the chief obstacle, Herzog indicates, was “the Palestinian mindset” that regards the purpose of negotiations as “exacting what Palestinians perceive to be their rights, rather than engaging in a two-way give-and-take.” This mindset shows no signs of abating.

Herzog stresses that Israeli settlement activity—whatever one thinks of its justice or injustice and its contribution to, or undercutting of, Israeli security—erodes Palestinians' “already-low level of trust in the peace process.” At the same time, Herzog reports, Netanyahu exhibited willingness to compromise on settlements.

In contrast, the Palestinians dismissed the Israeli insistence that any final agreement must include a Palestinian recognition of Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people. According to Herzog, “objections intensified with time to the point of them calling it a red line and publicly announcing their refusal even to discuss the matter in future negotiations.”

So long as Palestinians remain intransigent on this point, a lasting peace is impossible. Palestinians refuse to recognize Israel as a Jewish state to preserve their claim that the 5 million or so descendants—most of whom have never set foot in Israel—of the original

approximately 650,000 Palestinian refugees from 1948 have a right to settle there, regardless of any peace agreement. No Israeli prime minister could accept that fanciful claim.

Given these circumstances, I suggested to one senior government official, the best Netanyahu can hope for is to continue to “muddle through.” The official pointedly rejected my characterization.

The elusiveness or nonexistence of comprehensive solutions, he observed, is a common political condition and it does not condemn statesmen to aimless improvising. Preventing an unstable equilibrium from deteriorating while identifying opportunities for incremental improvement, the official continued, requires a reliable political compass and a sober understanding of the public interest.

He’s right.

In the eight years since Netanyahu returned to the prime minister’s office in 2009 (he also served from 1996 to 1999), violence and fanaticism have rocked the region. Israel has fought two military campaigns in the Gaza Strip (2012 and 2014) and defended itself against the so-called “Knife Intifada” (erupting in fall 2015 and continuing into spring 2016). Egypt has undergone two revolutions. After suffering devastating losses in the 2006 Second Lebanon War, Hezbollah has rearmed, vastly increasing the quantity and quality of its rockets and missiles, which today number approximately 150,000 and can reach targets everywhere in Israel. The greatest humanitarian catastrophe of the 21st century has been raging in Syria for six years. And the Obama-administration-led deal in 2015 over Iran’s nuclear program—which lifted sanctions while leaving much of the program’s infrastructure in place—emboldened Tehran’s export throughout the Middle East of weapons, terror, and Islamic extremism.

Despite the bloody upheaval all around, the Israeli economy has grown over the last eight years. And notwithstanding the additional hindrance of massive internal political corruption, the Palestinian economy has, by most measures, improved since 2009.

More can be done. The Trump administration should, for example, work with the Israelis to enhance the Jewish state’s commercial ties with the Palestinian Authority. The United States and Israel should cooperate to promote science and technology education among Palestinians, because those are the parts of education most resistant to politicization and yield the most immediate and tangible payoffs. At the same time, Trump should tie direct foreign aid to the PA’s reduction of the vile anti-Israel propaganda that it disseminates through its government-run media and schools. And, yes, Netanyahu should reduce and restrict settlement activity.

Execution of short-term steps is no replacement for attaining the long-term goal. Such steps should be seen, though, as the best available means for creating conditions under which Israelis and Palestinians can one day resolve their conflict. And who better than Donald

Trump to recognize the complexities of the art of the deal?

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