

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and The Arab Peace Initiative

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Senator Bernie Sanders' call during the primaries for a new approach to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was on-point and necessary. However, his plea for the US to adopt a policy of even-handedness in dealing with Israel and the Palestinians will not suffice. In fact, even if the incoming administration changed its approach by coercing Israel to make important concessions and stop its settlement enterprise, this will not produce the necessary conditions to make peace at this particular juncture of the conflict.

Furthermore, any new approach by the EU during the current UN General Assembly meetings to restart the talks in the traditional way, either directly or through mediation, will not lead to an agreement regardless of the pressure or incentives that may be employed to persuade Israel and the Palestinians to resume negotiations in earnest.

A process of reconciliation must precede any formal negotiations for about two years, because the conditions on the ground have dramatically changed for the worse since the Oslo Accords. For the Palestinians, hopelessness has set in, mutual distrust has deepened, and extremists on both sides have gained significant traction. Perhaps most important, the political landscape has shifted to the right in both camps, making it highly unlikely to resume peace talks with any prospect of reaching an agreement.

There is no doubt that Palestinian acts of violence against Israelis are a direct result of 50 years of occupation that continues to frustrate and incite them. Consequently, the Palestinians feel they have been left with no option but to resort to violence in an effort to end the occupation and pave the way for the establishment of their own state in the West Bank and Gaza.

Conversely, the Israelis can also make a persuasive argument that the Palestinians cannot be trusted. The Second Intifada in particular was a turning point in the mind of most Israelis, which further deepened their distrust and heightened (albeit often to exaggeration) their national security concerns.

Unfortunately, successive right-of-center Israeli governments, especially those led by Netanyahu, exploited security concerns to expropriate more Palestinian territory and build new and expand existing settlements to create so-called "secure borders."

To change the dynamic of the conflict, reconciliatory people-to-people measures becomes central to creating fertile ground for negotiations to succeed.

Such measures of reconciliation should include but not be limited to: facilitating mutual visitation, joint women activism, sporting events, student interaction, travelling art

exhibitions, encouraging public discourse, hosting forums to discuss conflicting issues, and imploring the media to promote such shared initiatives.

Additional steps can be taken by leadership on both sides, including: halting mutual acrimonious public narratives, modifying textbooks, taking no provocative actions (i.e. halting settlement expansion during the period of reconciliation), and maintaining security cooperation between the two sides.

These measures are central to changing the psychological dynamic of the conflict and sociopolitical environment between them by mitigating the problem of mutual distrust, national security, and the illusion that either can rule over all of mandated Palestine. Only by adhering to such a process will they demonstrate their commitment to peace, which has been lacking but is essential to making the necessary concessions to reach an agreement.

As the process of reconciliation gets underway, the United States and the European Union should make a supreme effort to reinvigorate the Arab Peace Initiative (API) and pressure both Israel and Hamas to embrace it. The Arab Peace Initiative remains the only practical framework for peace, as it contains common denominators between Israel and the Palestinians (including Hamas) that will facilitate successful peace negotiations.

Moreover, the API is the only framework that will lead to an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement in the context of a comprehensive Israeli-Arab peace, which the vast majority of Israelis and Palestinians are seeking in order to achieve long-term stability and progress.

Finally, the turmoil in the Middle East indeed offers an opportunity to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly now that the Arab world is keener than ever before to make peace with Israel because of the common Iranian threat and the violent rivalry between Sunnis and Shiites over regional hegemony.

The United States and the EU (the only powers that can bring an end to the conflict) and certainly moderate Israelis must exploit this window of opportunity and put an end to the longest and most debilitating violent conflict in modern times.

Russian President Putin's invitation to Netanyahu and Abbas to visit Moscow (which they have accepted) means little and will produce even less. For Putin, the invitation offers an opportunity to exploit the vacuum resulting from US disengagement; for Netanyahu, it will (falsely) demonstrate that he is committed to peace; and for Abbas, he simply doesn't want to be perceived as an obstacle.

Given that the United States was and remains the main player, neither Abbas nor Netanyahu can dismiss it. The new administration must support France's initiative, which seeks to convene an international conference to resume peace negotiations, and change its previous approach in the search for a peace agreement based on a two-state solution.

There is no doubt that the US must play a more assertive role toward Israel, especially because the US is genuinely concerned about Israel's national security. Providing Israel with \$38 billion in military aid over a period of 10 years is unprecedented and only attests to the US' commitment.

The next administration must stop enabling Israel to pursue policies which are to its detriment and insist that Israel genuinely engage in the process of reconciliation, which Netanyahu and Abbas, who profess to seek a two-state solution, will be hard-pressed to

reject.

In this regard, the EU is well-placed to push the peace process forward by focusing first on reconciliation and giving time to the new administration to join the French initiative, which is largely consistent with the US' traditional position.

The new administration, jointly with the EU, must also make it abundantly clear that a two-state solution provides, more than any other security measure, the ultimate guarantee of Israel's national security while allowing the Palestinians to live in dignity in an independent state.

After seventy years of continuing violent conflict, the time has come to end the hellish conditions that the Israelis and Palestinians have created for themselves before they are ultimately consumed by it. As Thomas Hobbes is purported to have said, "hell is truth seen too late."

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