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Trump-Netanyahu: How to avoid previous setbacks

Among the ways the US can help bring peace: offer a ‘Marshall Plan’ for Palestinian economic development



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The last two years have seen a sharp rise in fatalities and injuries resulting from Israeli-Palestinian hostilities. On the eve of the Trump-Netanyahu meeting there are long odds for a permanent status agreement in the foreseeable future. Israelis and Palestinians distrust each other, are too far apart on the core contentious issues – territory, refugees, security arrangements and Jerusalem – and the respective leaderships are reluctant to move ahead.

For two and a half decades, third parties have tried to resolve this conflict. Rarely have their efforts been instrumental, at times they were redundant, but too often they spoiled real progress. If, indeed, the new Trump Administration aims at leading an effort to facilitate Israeli-Palestinian peace, it should take into consideration lessons drawn from past failures.

Any conceptual framework should comprise facilitated bilateral negotiations, however, not as the exclusive course of action. It should simultaneously promote tracks of regional dialogue and independent constructive steps. Such steps will allow preserving the conditions for a two state solution through the gradual creation of a two-state reality. They can take the form of political interim agreements, gradual processes with transitional phases and a pragmatic uncompromising approach to counter terror, violence and any form of extremism.

Additional components should be considered in the political process.

The United States should pursue an Israeli commitment not to establish or permit the building of Israeli settlements outside pre-defined major settlement blocs east of the security barrier. In return, the international community should be ready to differentiate between settlement activity within and outside the blocs rather than adopt the notion that all settlements ‘have no legal validity and constitute a flagrant violation under international law’ or present a ‘major obstacle to peace’, as recently stipulated in UNSCR 2334. At the same time, the U.S. should guarantee to Israel to veto any UN Resolution that will impose a final arrangement on the parties.

Second, a third party should aim for firm commitments by the Palestinians to relentlessly counter terror against Israelis anywhere and to halt their campaign to internationalize the conflict by advocating for the condemnation of Israel in international organizations, advancing criminal proceedings against Israel at the International Criminal Court or promoting BDS.

Third, the U.S. and the Palestinians should be willing to establish a task-force committed to fight incitement to violence and glorification of terrorism against Israelis. It must actively prevent the dissemination of anti-Semitic stereotypes found today in Palestinian school plays, television programs, newspaper cartoons. Social media plays an important role in this context and Facebook posts that teach you how to stab a Jew cannot be considered a mere nuisance. The same must be true for payments to the martyr's fund and the naming of streets, schools or football teams after terrorists.

President Trump is well positioned to recognize that economic development in the Palestinian territories is one key-element for shaping the region's stability

. A third party initiative for a 'Marshall Plan' for Palestinian development, preferably led by the U.S., should invite the relatively moderate Sunni-Arab states to be partners of Israelis and Palestinians, rewarding an Israeli diplomatic commitment by publicly acknowledging joint strategic interests and strong security cooperation in the region. A Saudi-led delegation of businessmen and academics to Israel in July 2016 was an important step in the right direction. Economic capabilities of the U.S., the E.U., Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are well-suited for the establishment of such a Palestinian development plan, as well as for addressing the rehabilitation of the Palestinian refugees within a global context.

Other ingredients of such a plan could include the building of large co-working spaces by companies such as 'WeWork' or 'MindSpace' between Jerusalem and Ramallah, for Middle East start-up companies; the Gulf States and Israel should sign a Memorandum of Understanding that will allow for visits of high-tech and trade delegations, academic and journalistic exchange programs and a trilateral energy forum, focusing on renewable energy and water purifying; promoting meaningful economic access for Palestinians to Area C in the West Bank, a territorial unit that makes up 60 percent of the West Bank. In October 2016, the Israeli security cabinet approved a number of building projects for Palestinians in Area C, formulated by COGAT Head Maj. Gen. Yoav Mordechai and presented by Defence Minister Lieberman.

In addition, in return for an easing of Israel's naval blockade, the 'Marshall Plan' for Palestinian development should concretize plans for the reconstruction of Gaza and discuss the prospects of a Gaza seaport and airport, based on rock-solid security arrangements and within the framework of a regional diplomatic understanding, including the U.S., Israel, Turkey, the Palestinian Authority, Hamas, and Egypt. Last but not least, an educational roadmap is needed, one that will include academic, cultural and journalistic exchange programs, joint music, dance and theatre performances, regional sports competitions, professional internship programs, scientific and research grants and joint professional expert forums. Young Israelis and

Palestinians need not to adopt the other party's narrative but merely know that it exists and what it means.

In conclusion, President Trump should carefully craft the U.S.-led third party's effort in pursuing the trend for an Israeli-Palestinian two-state reality. Peace is still possible. It requires political action and public engagement, internal dialogue within respective societies, building bridges from within, and preparation of hearts and minds for a compromise and a perception shift. This is the responsibility of the parties themselves. Trump, along with the EU, Russia and the UN, could provide the binding, comprehensive, multi-layered continuous process. The formula of "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed", applied in Camp David 2000 and the subsequent 2008 Annapolis talks should be replaced by the credo "whatever is agreed will be implemented."

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