



A BOLD INITIATIVE FOR COMPREHENSIVE REGIONAL SECURITY AND PEACE - GROUNDED IN US RECOGNITION OF PALESTINE

Issue Brief #19 | Updated March 5, 2024

Summary of Recommendation

J Street calls on the Biden Administration to outline a bold diplomatic initiative promoting security, peace and hope for Israelis, Palestinians and their regional neighbors.

Central to this initiative would be an unprecedented offer of American recognition of the state of Palestine *prior* to such recognition by Israel and of security guarantees for Israel, Palestine and their neighbors. This offer - along with specification of conditions to reach that point - can jumpstart diplomacy that leads in a defined and limited time to resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to regional normalization between Israel and its Arab neighbors.

Background

In the wake of Hamas' horrific attack on October 7 and the devastating Israel-Hamas war that ensued, there is broad recognition that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict "cannot go back" to the pre-October 7 reality of never-ending violence, occupation and conflict management. For more than two decades, core tenets of American policy have been to envision recognition of Palestinian statehood only after or concurrent with Israeli recognition, and to separate Israeli-Arab normalization from Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution.

Even in the post-October 7 reality, the desire for normalization of relations between Israel and many of its Arab neighbors, in particular Saudi Arabia, remains strong. There is also a recognition that Saudi Arabia and other Arab states cannot normalize with Israel without the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Meanwhile, the Israeli people are coming to grips with the post-October 7th reality that endless occupation and so-called conflict management failed miserably in providing national and personal security.

That is why any significant new initiative for post-conflict diplomacy must provide both the Palestinian people a clear political horizon leading to statehood and the Israeli people with new guarantees of enhanced security. Major world powers - in particular the United States as the "indispensable player" - can jumpstart a serious diplomatic initiative to build a different future, by laying out a bold vision that offers recognition of Palestinian statehood and a new regional security architecture grounded in normalized Israeli relations with all its neighbors including the state of Palestine.

Specific Recommendations

The Biden Administration should chart a clear path out of the horrors of the current war, and it could do so in the following five steps. All aspects of this plan should be grounded in the end goal of providing security, dignity and self-determination to both Israelis and Palestinians.

Step One: Secure a stop to the fighting, the release of hostages, a surge in humanitarian aid to Gaza - and lay out a comprehensive diplomatic initiative and vision

The most vital first step is to secure an immediate stop to the fighting in Gaza, the release of the remaining hostages and a surge of humanitarian assistance desperately needed by Gaza's civilian population. The Biden Administration is actively engaged in the tough diplomacy necessary to achieve such an agreement in short order.

In parallel to negotiations to that end - or as soon as a pause in the fighting begins - we recommend a major presidential speech laying out a bold vision for the post-conflict future and a comprehensive regional diplomatic initiative to realize it. To be heard by the traumatized people at the center of this conflict, the initiative has to be rooted in promises of security and acceptance for Israelis and security, freedom and self-determination for Palestinians. The speech should offer American recognition of a demilitarized state of Palestine as a key incentive for Palestinian participation and offer American help in achieving regional normalization and security as a key incentive for Israeli participation.

Step Two: Ask for parallel, unilateral steps by Israelis and Palestinians

The President should ask each side to take a series of immediate, unilateral steps to demonstrate their interest in moving forward.

- Israel should be asked to take a series of well-known steps to reduce tensions. The list includes releasing customs revenues to the Palestinian Authority, reactivating permits for Palestinian workers from the West Bank to enter Israel, ending home demolitions, stopping settlement expansion, limiting incursions into Area A, changing the status of some land in Area C to B, and B to A, cracking down on settler violence and of course facilitating a surge of humanitarian assistance to Gaza.
- The PLO/PA should in parallel take a series of steps including establishing a new government - or Transitional Authority - with a new Prime Minister and other Ministers who are nonpartisan and committed to meaningful reform. The leadership of Hamas and anyone involved in planning or executing the October 7 massacre can have no role in this new Transitional Authority, which must affirm its commitment to building a demilitarized state that will fight terror, recognize Israel and commit to nonviolence. The revitalized PA should start implementing a series of reforms – including in the areas of democracy and governance, finance, judiciary, combating corruption, overhauling the prisoner payment program, education and incitement. While the new Authority builds toward a demilitarized state, the United States should continue training and building a capable Palestinian security force, as it has for nearly two decades, that can ensure the new state's internal security and cooperate with neighboring states, including Israel, in combating terror.

Step Three: Recognize Palestine and reissue the Arab Peace Initiative

In return for each side taking the unilateral steps outlined, the President should propose that:

- The United States and other partners – including European countries and other US allies that do not yet recognize Palestinian statehood – recognize the state of Palestine after

the Palestinians have taken the unilateral steps asked of them. At this point, the President would also commit that on completion of negotiations, he would seek legislation from Congress that would address existing US restrictions relating to funding the PA and UN bodies— a necessary step for the US to support admission of Palestine to the UN.

- After the specified steps have been taken by Israel, and Israel has committed to entering negotiations over final status issues based on clear terms of reference, the Arab League should convene to reaffirm the Arab Peace Initiative. Beyond full regional recognition of Israel, the President should propose that leading Arab countries (along with the US, the G7, the EU, etc.) commit to participate in Marshall Plan-scale investment in redevelopment of Gaza and the West Bank through the new Transitional Palestinian Authority referenced above, with reconstruction and security overseen in partnership with Arab countries.
- The President should lay out the framework for a new regional security architecture that would encompass both Israel and Palestine as well as their neighbors, with meaningful American involvement and international support. This will greatly enhance security for Israelis and also for Palestinians, with the state of Palestine receiving meaningful guarantees regarding sovereignty over its own territory.

Step Four: Negotiate on two tracks – Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution and Israel-Saudi normalization

Fourth, the President should propose that following US recognition of Palestine and the reaffirmation of the Arab Peace Initiative, the United States would lead a new UN Security Council resolution laying out the parameters for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and confirming the path to admission for Palestine as a full member state.

Negotiations should be proposed on two tracks, toward two agreements between:

- The states of Israel and Palestine, guided by parameters laid out in the UNSC resolution on borders and other final status issues, with the active participation and facilitation of the United States and other international actors.
- Saudi Arabia, Israel and the United States in which the US would make certain bilateral security commitments to both countries, Israel would confirm its intent to recognize Palestine and negotiate a final status agreement, and Saudi Arabia would recognize Israel.

The two tracks would move in parallel, and necessary US legislation to facilitate these agreements would be pursued as a package - hopefully attracting wide bipartisan support.

Step Five: Take Congressional action necessary to enable both sets of agreements and support Palestinian admission to the UN as a member state

Finally, when agreements are complete on both tracks, the President would bring to Congress the necessary legislation to facilitate both the Saudi normalization and the Israeli-Palestinian peace agreements. The legislative package would include the necessary removal of prohibitions regarding funding of the United Nations following admission of Palestine, diplomatic representation in the US for the PLO and of funding directly to the state of Palestine.

These legislative changes would allow the United States to support the final step in this process, the admission of Palestine as a full member state in the United Nations.

Conclusion

The horrific attack by Hamas on October 7th and the disastrous war in Gaza that followed are the latest dire signs of the urgent need for an entirely new approach to Middle East diplomacy. The ideas that progress is impossible, that ambitions must be minimal and that this irresolvable conflict can be managed have been thoroughly discredited. The tragic suffering on both sides and the utter lack of hope call for a bold new vision and hard-nosed diplomacy to realize it.

We believe the best interests of the United States are served by laying out the choices all sides must make to create meaningful security and a future grounded in dignity and self-determination for the entire region. The President can and should urgently provide both incentives to, and a strong push on, the various parties to turn away from never-ending conflict toward a future built on diplomacy and security achieved through peace.