

Next Steps on Israeli-Palestinian Peace *Maintaining Momentum after the President's Visit*

By Keith W MINES

In President Trump's recent trip to Riyadh, Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and in previous meetings with the heads of state of Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey, he reiterated his seriousness about moving forward on Middle East peace. In each meeting he made clear it is a top priority of his administration. The theme continued in his visit to the Vatican, where the Pope gave the President a small sculpted olive tree and told his guest: "It is my desire that you become an olive tree to construct peace." The President later tweeted that it was the "honor of a lifetime to meet His Holiness Pope Francis. I leave the Vatican more determined than ever to pursue peace in our world."

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told reporters the President "was very forceful in his encouragement to [the Israelis and Palestinians] to be serious about approaching these discussions in the future, and recognize they have to compromise." The President sent Special Representative for International Negotiations Jason Greenblatt back to the region immediately after the visit to work on next steps.

The President should recognize that there is a window of opportunity with the success of the recent trip and the stated willingness on the part of all parties to work for peace. But it is still a narrow window that will require skillful diplo-



macy and positive steps by the parties and regional actors to exploit.

Time for Hard Steps?

The Administration has offered little detail on what the next steps might be. But there are a number of things that would be useful in maintaining momentum. One of the things that has doomed past efforts is moving into talks before forcing the parties to prepare the ground politically with their constituents. Israelis, Palestinians and key Arab leaders have political demons that they have allowed to grow and, in some cases, actively nourished. If they are not able or willing to contain these demons, any negotiation becomes an exercise in futility -- waiting for the process to end and returning to an ever-deteriorating status quo.

Before embarking on closed bilateral talks, an international conference, or even terms of reference, it would be useful—and reasonable—to make a politically difficult "ask" of each of the



First, he could set up some form of consultative mechanism with the key Arab players and Turkey so they are not kept in the dark as they were at Camp David in 2000. Inviting them in only after the table was set, according to officials involved in the process, limited their willingness to play a constructive role. This was corrected to a degree in the latest initiative by then-Secretary of State John Kerry,

but more could be done. Arab leaders and Turkey need to be involved early, often and thoughtfully.

Second, President Trump could explore developing regional security arrangements that include Israel. That might mean more robust security ties with Egypt and Jordan than currently exist, and more formal coordination with Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Cooperation Council and others. The U.S. would be the glue that would hold such arrangements together.

Third, he could urge Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey to warm their currently cool peace with Israel, which would reassure the Israelis on any future peace deals. He could also provide encouragement to the recent offer by the Persian Gulf States to improve relations while working with the GCC to improve the offer.

Fourth, he could embrace other options for Arab involvement in the peace process. The Israeli NGO Israeli Regional Initiative, for example, has posited a new framework for peace that in-

parties. These commitments would require them to take risks, possibly including political realignments that would be more conducive to peace.

For Israel, it could be a fresh, publicly articulated commitment to a Palestinian state as an end goal, with tangible action to curb settlements. Palestinians could affirm their commitment to a two-state goal, clarifying the 1988 formulation of Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace and security, while denouncing violence and taking tangible steps to end incitement against Israel.

The Arab Quartet could reaffirm its commitment to two states and normalized relations with Israel, as laid out in the Arab Peace Initiative. Further, it could commit to meaningful gestures in advance of a final agreement, as part of an agreed process of coordinated confidence building.

And a Key Role for the Arab World

But the actions of the Arab world can also shape the ambiance for peace more broadly. President Trump has several options for how to better include them in the process.



volves Israel “conceding to the Palestinians and being compensated by the Arab states” in a regional framework. It includes an immediate circle of the Middle East and Arab world and a larger circle with the entire Islamic world, with a phased process and reciprocal steps. It also would draw in the Arab states on key sticking points where their involvement is needed – Jerusalem, security, and refugees.

An Upgraded Arab Initiative?

But the most central component of bringing the Arab world productively into a peace process would require persuading Israel to acknowledge an updated Arab Peace Initiative. That initiative was put on the table in March 2002 at the Arab League’s Beirut Summit. It is a modified version of an earlier Saudi proposal. The simple construct calls on Israel to affirm the 1967 borders, agree to a just solution for the refugee problem, and accept an independent Palestinian state.

In return, the Arab countries would consider the

conflict ended, provide for a regional security arrangement, and establish normal relations with Israel. In the words of Jordan’s former Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher, who co-authored the document, it turns the three no’s of the 1967 Khartoum Arab League Summit into three yeses: yes to negotiation, yes to recognition and yes to peace.

In the words of former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in her 2011 memoir, it was a “bold proposal and could have been an important point of departure for negotiations.” But as she pointed out, “its timing could not have been worse.” Three days later, a suicide bomber killed 29 and wounded 150 at a Passover Seder in Netanya, in one of the bloodiest months of the Second Intifada. Israel ignored the Arab gesture and the U.S. was lukewarm to it, distracted as it was in Afghanistan and soon in Iraq.

The proposal was left on the table. But as analyst Elie Podeh points out no Israeli government ever acknowledged it, even after the Arab League re-

peatedly affirmed the offer, and Qatari Prime Minister Prince Hamid bin Jasim Al Thani in 2013 added minor land swaps to the menu. Arab leaders at various times since then considered formally updating it to be more realistic on territory—less insistent on the Golan Heights and re-stating an opening for land swaps. But they refused to inscribe such changes in an Arab Peace Initiative 2.0 until Israel at least acknowledged the offer, even with caveats.

A lot has changed in 12 years, and the Arab world is in a very different position now than in 2002. The growth of threats they share with Israel, especially from Iran and ISIL, has greatly expanded their room for maneuver. A U.S. orchestration of an upgraded Arab initiative with Israeli acknowledgement, together with other positive gestures, could set the stage for further Arab moves as the process evolves. It would be a useful baseline that serves as an important tool going forward.

Most commentators and analysts are skeptical that this time will be any different than the previous failed efforts at peace, and indeed the safest bet would probably still be on the process not ultimately coming together. But a firm commitment from the White House to make this round different, if combined with real steps by the parties and a new regional approach by newly committed players, would present a viable new formula. If the American administration can draw the players out on their different roles, it certainly deserves a chance.

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About Author

Keith W Mines is an Interagency Fellow in Residence at the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP). Before coming to USIP he was political counselor at the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv and Consul General in Mazar e-Sharif, where he oversaw U.S. assistance and outreach to the nine provinces of Northern Afghanistan. Mr. Mines is a career foreign service officer with additional postings to Mexico City, San Salvador, Port-au-Prince, Washington D.C. (Brazilian affairs), Budapest and Ottawa. Mr. Mines also served in Darfur, Al Anbar - Iraq, Kabul, and Mogadishu. Prior to joining the Foreign Service, he was a U.S. Army Special Forces officer with service in Grenada, Central America and North Carolina. He was educated at Brigham Young University and Georgetown University where he studied history and diplomacy. He has published extensively on post-conflict reconstruction and stabilization and security and defense architecture in the post-Westphalian world.