

COMMENTARY

No.328

Friday, 20 November 2015

The Absence of Real Commitment to Peace

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Regardless of what Prime Minister Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Abbas stated in their speeches at the United Nations General Assembly, neither is genuinely committed to negotiating a peace agreement based on a two-state solution. Both leaders were engaged in empty rhetoric and slogans for domestic consumption instead of proposing new, credible, and constructive initiatives to resume the negotiations that could lead to a peace agreement, which should have been the thrust of their appearances at the UNGA. That, however, was not and still is not the case.

Peace is becoming ever more elusive as both sides continue to hold onto what appear to be irreconcilable positions when in fact Israeli-Palestinian coexistence is here to stay. Regardless of how much longer the conflict persists, they are stuck together and must choose between peace or perpetual self-consuming violent hostilities, which are escalating at the time of this writing.

Had both sides been truly committed to reaching a peace agreement, they would have made the necessary compromises to make peace years if not decades ago.

Thus, for Netanyahu to proclaim that he is ready to resume peace negotiations unconditionally means nothing, and for Abbas to merely demand the release of a handful of prisoners, an end to the expansion of settlements, and international recognition means even less.

Netanyahu and his coalition partners publicly claim that the entire land extending from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River is the land of Israel and that Israel is not an occupying power, giving them every right to build settlements anywhere on its biblical land.

Conversely, whereas Abbas professes to seek peace based on a two-state solution, he is weak and his hands are tied as there is a significant constituency within the Palestinian body politic led by Hamas and other extremist groups that still demand that all of Mandated Palestine become the State of Palestine.

Moreover, instead of preparing the public for the necessary concessions needed to reach an agreement, he continues to make untenable demands, such as the “right of return,” which further hardens the Palestinian public’s stance.

To demonstrate their true commitment to peace, Israeli and Palestinian leaders must rethink their inescapable reality. They must muster the courage to come forth and together announce that, given their people’s desire to live in peace and the inevitability of coexistence, they are absolutely committed to reaching a peace accord and would do so under any circumstances.

To that end, they will have to be prepared to undertake many significant measures before and during the negotiating process to begin building the pillars for sustainable peace, including:

First, establish rules of engagement that can advance the negotiating process so that solving one conflicting issue can facilitate or lead to a solution of another.

In this regard, it is of paramount importance to commence the negotiations by first establishing the parameters of the future Palestinian state (leaving Jerusalem’s final borders until its eventual status is determined) to give Palestinians a clear view of such, and the confidence that they are moving toward statehood.

This will logically and practically lead to facilitating the negotiations over the future of much of the settlements along the 1967 borders as well as addressing important aspects of Israel’s national security concerns, which Netanyahu links to the final contours of the borders.

Second, end public mutual recrimination and any direct or indirect incitements in order to maintain a positive atmosphere during and beyond the negotiating process.

Third, disallow any violent incident by either side from disrupting the negotiations. As the late Yitzhak Rabin once invoked, “Fight terrorism as if there is no peace process; pursue peace as if there is no terrorism,” so that no provocation, regardless of the source, can derail the negotiations.

Fourth, share with the public any progress made in the negotiations as well as some of the difficulties being encountered without finger pointing, in order for the public to develop a vested interest in the negotiating process and also be prepared for the concessions needed to reach an agreement.

Fifth, make security cooperation transparent to send a clear message that Israeli-Palestinian full collaboration on all aspects of security will continue, and any inadvertent security breaches by either side will be dealt with, with full cooperation between their internal security apparatus.

Sixth, provide regular briefings for the press to engender public discussion which will assist in the development of a national consensus in support of peace and raise expectations for reaching an agreement.

Seventh, cultivate trust by ensuring that the Israeli and Palestinian governments, and their respective civil societies, play a constructive role throughout the negotiations to nurture mutual trust, which is indispensable throughout the negotiations and beyond.

To that end, the following measures must regularly be undertaken from the day the negotiations commence: organize tourism between Israel and Palestine; encourage Israeli and Palestinian sports teams to train and compete together; prompt Israeli and Palestinian students to mingle with their counterparts; host joint art exhibitions for Israeli and Palestinian artists; hold joint forums to discuss conflicting issues; support women-led groups in their efforts to make their voices heard and wage peace; and organize roundtable public discussions between Israeli and Palestinian religious and secular scholars to foster a better understanding of the nuances of the conflicting issues.

Eighth, modify textbooks to reflect the historic narrative more accurately to mitigate the psychological impediment between the two sides, especially those issues with historic, religious, or national security implications, which are embedded in the public psyche.

Ninth, brief all political parties or factions in Israel and Palestine about the negotiating process to mitigate some of the intense opposition to the many compromises that will have to be made.

Finally, invite high level representatives from the US and the Arab states (particularly Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan), as well as European representatives from England, France, and Germany, to monitor, facilitate, and encourage the negotiating teams to move forward and use the Arab Peace Initiative as the overall framework for a comprehensive peace.

To be sure, even a cursory review of past negotiations clearly demonstrates that neither Netanyahu nor Abbas was ready or willing to undertake such critical measures, neither in advance nor during the negotiations, which speaks volumes about their complete lack of commitment to reaching a peace agreement.

Only when they adopt these basic prerequisites will they demonstrate their true commitment to making peace. Indeed, all of their speeches and public statements ring hollow as they continue to wallow in self-denial and defy reality to the detriment of their peoples.

Note: This article was originally published in the web portal of Prof. Ben-Meir and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/the-absence-of-real-commitment-to-peace/>

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