

# COMMENTARY

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## Earning the Nobel Peace Prize

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**A**warding the Nobel Peace Prize to President Obama early on in his first term was largely based on the premise that he would pursue peace and end existing violent conflicts to make the world a better and safer place for all people. The President's efforts to end the war in Iraq and wind down the war in Afghanistan are admirable, regardless of what may befall these countries in years to come. The President, however, fell short in his effort during his first term to forge peace between Israel and the Palestinians, which remains extraordinarily pivotal to regional stability. The raging conflicts throughout the Middle East—the horrific civil war in Syria, the unending violence in Iraq, the instability in Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, Libya, and the simmering conflict with Iran—may appear to have little to do with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, yet they are interconnected and will affect one another. A resolution to this decades-long explosive conflict will have an immediate and direct impact on the stability of the entire region and singularly earn President Obama the Nobel Peace Prize he was awarded.

With the confirmation of John Kerry as Secretary of State, the Obama administration must develop a comprehensive strategy geared toward stabilizing the region and remain engaged to preserve its sphere of influence and ensure continuing stability while maintaining its strategic interests. There is not a single Arab country that does not seek American support to end the civil war in Syria and to protect its own turf; there will be no solution to Iran's nuclear weapons program without direct American involvement and no solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without direct and active American engagement. President Obama may well be reluctant, especially following the two bruising wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to involve America in other conflicts which may require direct or indirect military intervention. The US, however, will have little choice but to project its multi-faceted powers -economic, political and military- to

influence, if not shape, the outcome of these conflicts before they explode in America's face and spin the entire region out of control.

A solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict stands out as the singular most troubling conflict because the Palestinian problem continues to feed into the Arab frenzy, especially in the wake of the Arab Spring. Although the Israelis and Palestinians are not slugging each other day in and day out, that does not suggest that the relative quiet can last as the conflict continues to simmer beneath the surface. Given the regional turbulence and the continuing debilitating status of the Palestinians, I strongly believe that unless the US initiates a new peace offensive, it will only be a matter of time until the Israeli-Palestinian conflict explodes with more far-reaching regional repercussions than can be envisioned. In Prague, on his first European visit in April 2009, President Obama emphatically stated, "When we fail to pursue peace, then it stays forever beyond our grasp." No individual, let alone the President, can ignore a conflict that has spanned over three generations in such a pivotal region when the stakes are so high for the United States and its allies.

It is interesting to note that throughout the Israeli election campaign, all political parties from the extreme left to the far right focused primarily on domestic socio-economic issues, while the conflict with the Palestinians received scant attention. In his confirmation hearing, John Kerry stated "There were elections yesterday [in Israel] and we still don't know which government it's going to be...I pray that maybe this will be a moment that will allow us to renew the effort to the one they were on in the last few years. I would like to try and do that." Mr. Kerry's efforts to "bring the parties to the negotiating table and go down a different path" should not be mere wishful thinking. The US must realistically assess where Netanyahu, who will most likely form the next Israeli coalition government, really stands on the prospect of the two-state solution and what kind of measures the US is prepared to take if it wishes to lead Israel and the Palestinians toward a peace settlement. The result of the Israeli elections will more than likely force Netanyahu to invite Yair Lapid, the leader of left-of-centre party Yesh Atid (who made bread-and-butter issues and social justice his central political themes), to join his government. This should not mislead anyone to think, however, that Netanyahu will automatically moderate his views about the Palestinians and actually act to advance the two-state solution as the only practical option to end the conflict. He will publically support such a solution to pacify the US, but will certainly be guided by his conviction and play for time, as he does not believe that Israel is an occupying power and that the West Bank is an integral part of the Jewish people's ancestral land.

The Palestinian victory in becoming a non-member observer state at the UNGA has yet to yield any improvements in their condition on the ground; on the contrary, the Palestinian Authority (PA) is now facing dire financial problems. The Obama administration's opposition to the

Palestinian bid for UNGA membership has in fact encouraged Netanyahu to accelerate the expansion of settlements while withholding tax revenue from the Palestinians, making their acute financial crisis even worse, albeit he recently transferred US\$100 million to the PA. Adding to their financial difficulties, Palestinian factionalism and infighting (the rivalry between Fatah and Hamas) further complicates the prospect of genuine peace negotiations, especially since Hamas continues to openly seek Israel's destruction. Here, the Obama administration must rethink its position in relation to the Palestinians and how it must treat Hamas, which ultimately cannot be excluded from the peace process if the US wishes to pursue sustainable peace.

While it seems logical that the Israelis and the Palestinians should sort out their own problems, history has shown that they have simply been unwilling or unable to do just that. Indeed, the conflict transcends territory, security, refugees, settlements or the future of Jerusalem; it is highly emotional and shrouded with intense hatred and distrust, further hampered by psychological hang-ups emanating from deep historical experiences and religious beliefs.

In his speech at the United Nations in September 2011, President Obama said: "Ultimately, it is the Israelis and the Palestinians who must live side by side. Ultimately, it is the Israelis and the Palestinians—not us—who must reach agreement on the issues that divide them: on borders and on security, on refugees and Jerusalem." If the President feels today the way he felt then, he should not expect a breakthrough in the peace process any time soon. The United States' role has been and remains indispensable, as was reflected in John Kerry's speech in March 2009 at the Brookings Institution when he said: "While I believe there must be an enhanced role for the regional players, nothing can substitute for our [the United States'] crucial role as an active and creative agent for peace [emphasis added]."

Given the current regional upheavals and the Iranian threat of regional ambition, if the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved over the next couple of years it could ignite a massive violent conflagration that will undermine the prospect of achieving a settlement and severely damage the U.S.' strategic interests and credibility in the region. Notwithstanding Obama's failure to achieve a breakthrough in the peace process during his first term, he now has one last chance to push for an agreement. John Kerry, who is only too familiar with the travails of the conflict, may succeed with the full support of the President where others have failed.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, however, as Palestinians watch young men and women in several Arab states fighting and dying for their freedoms, their own relative passivity will not last forever. In his speech after he was awarded the Nobel Prize in December 2009 the President said: "For peace is not merely the absence of visible conflict. Only a just peace based on the inherent rights and dignity of every individual can truly be lasting." The President must now live up to that premise. He cannot kick the ball down the field and leave the region to the whims of

other powers—Russia and Iran—that will go to any length to undermine American interests while tearing the Israelis and Palestinians further apart without any prospect of reconciliation.

For these reasons, what President Obama and his Secretary of State do within the next few months will have a clear and immediate effect on how the Israelis and Palestinians conduct themselves in anticipation of a new American initiative to resolve the conflict. The notion that the U.S. should not have a greater desire for peace than the parties to the conflict is flawed. The lack of peace will continue to erode the U.S.’ interest and influence and undermine its role in shaping the outcome of the multiple upheavals sweeping the region in the wake of the Arab Spring. The United States may well have to save the Israelis and the Palestinians from themselves and use both inducement and coercive measures if necessary to that end.

To advance the real prospect for peace between Israel and Palestine, President Obama must take a number of critical steps:

First, within the next few months, the President should visit the region and directly address the Israeli as well as the Palestinian people. For most Israelis, Obama’s failure to visit their country when he travelled three times to the region during his first term (visiting four Muslim states) was nothing short of a slap in the face. Skipping Israel and the Palestinians seemed odd, especially in light of the fact that President Obama made a solution to the conflict a top priority in his first term by appointing former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell as a Special Envoy to the region only a few days after his first inauguration. A visit to Israel in particular could be a game changer, where the President can explain why only peace will ultimately ensure Israel’s national security, democracy and the Jewish national identity of the state. The President should reiterate his commitment to a two-state solution and emphasize that the U.S. will use all means available at its disposal to advance the peace process while maintaining an unshakable commitment to Israel’s national security. President Obama’s visit to Israel will further reinforce the belief that nearly all Israelis share—that the United States is the only ally they can trust without any reservation. The President may also expand the existing strategic agreement with Israel by offering to enter into a mutual defence treaty with Israel once a peace agreement with the Palestinians is achieved. Such a bilateral defence treaty could then develop and become a part of a regional security umbrella between Israel and every Arab state that is at peace with Israel.

Second, the President must carry with him a general framework for peace based on a prior understanding negotiated between the two sides, especially those achieved in 2000 (at Camp David between Yasser Arafat and Ehud Barak) and 2007-2008 (between Ehud Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas). In both sets of comprehensive negotiations, the two sides had been able to resolve the vast majority of the conflicting issues; in the latter, then-Israeli Prime Minister Olmert stated both sides had come “very close, more than ever in the past, to complete a

principle agreement that would have led to the end of the conflict.” These prior agreements should be placed on the table anew and modified to factor in the changing conditions on the ground, creating a clear basis for negotiating a comprehensive agreement with the U.S.’ direct and active participation. The US must use all means available at its disposal, including political, economic, and coercive measures to exact the necessary concessions from both sides to reach an agreement.

Third, to increase the framework’s effectiveness, a new independent envoy should be appointed with a clear presidential mandate to work relentlessly to advance the negotiation process while maintaining a top-level American official in the region to keep up the momentum and the pressure in case of the occasional absence of the envoy. By way of example, former President Clinton would be a remarkable choice, or for that matter former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, or someone in their calibre; namely, a widely respected figure who would be welcomed by both sides. The envoy should be present in every single session to find out how sincere the Israelis and the Palestinians are in the search for peace and to what extent they are prepared to make the painful concessions needed to reach an agreement. The Israeli and Palestinian contention that there is no partner with whom to negotiate or that the other cannot be trusted to negotiate in good faith would be dispelled or confirmed in these face-to-face negotiations (only, however, with an American presence).

Fourth, it is imperative that the US reaches out to leading Arab and Muslim states such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and others that can exert pressure on the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank to make necessary concessions. Similarly, Egypt and Turkey, who both enjoy great leverage on Hamas, should persuade its leadership to change its acrimonious public pronouncements against Israel, as well as its antagonism and hard-line policy against Israel. In particular, Hamas must renounce violence as a tool by which to reach its political objective of establishing an independent Palestinian state and remove from its charter the clause that calls for Israel’s destruction, in return for the promise of American recognition. Hamas must be treated as a political party who does not need to recognize Israel or accept prior agreements (the principles stipulated by the Quartet), but would be required to do so as a precondition to being a legitimate partner in the negotiations once they become the governing authority of all Palestinians. The Arab states, especially Egypt under the Muslim Brotherhood or any other regime, will always have serious stakes in finding a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and could play a leading role in persuading Hamas to change course. Indeed, the government of Egypt has mediated several times between Hamas and Israel in the past under the Mubarak regime. More recently the Egyptian government arranged for a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas with American involvement. In fact, Israeli officials had direct contact with Hamas in Cairo in order to negotiate the terms of the latest ceasefire, following the violent flare-up between the two sides in mid-November 2012.

Fifth, in reaching out to the Arab and Muslim world, the President should help reignite the Arab Peace Initiative (API), which still represents the most comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The revival of the API remains critically important, as even top Israeli officials including President Shimon Peres and former head of the Mossad Meir Dagan have strongly endorsed the API as central to resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the wake of the Arab Spring, restarting the API will have special thrust; as the whole region undergoes revolutionary change, the API represents a key factor in maintaining and enhancing the momentum toward positive and constructive regional change. In his Brookings speech, Mr. Kerry rightly invoked the Arab Peace Initiative when he said: “This bold step never received the focus it deserved when Saudi King Abdullah proposed it in 2002. We cannot underestimate the importance that, through this initiative, every Arab country (including all Muslim states) has now agreed to the basic formulation of land for peace, recognition of the state of Israel, and normalization of relations.” The creation of a “sovereign independent Palestinian state,” which the API calls for, will greatly contribute to stabilizing the region. Indeed, most if not all Arab and Muslim countries will begin normalizing relations with Israel and foster a lasting peace that will ultimately improve the lives of millions of ordinary citizens throughout the region.

Sixth, the perception that Congress is more supportive of Israel than the President must be dispelled, and no one can do that better than the President himself. During his first term, President Obama provided Israel with greater political, economic and military support than any of his predecessors. Before he embarks on a new peace initiative, the President should use the opportunity of his upcoming State of the Union Address, or seize any other opportunity to articulate to the American people and to Congress how critical it is for Israel to forge peace and why it is in the best interests of the United States to take the lead, however uncertain the prospect may be, to help Israel reach peace with security. The President needs to explain that by not taking action now, Israel’s future as a democratic and Jewish state could be jeopardized. Being a trusted friend of Israel, Secretary of State John Kerry can further articulate and emphasize to Congressional leaders the need to act soon, because Israel’s peace with the Palestinians is an integral part of the US’ commitment to Israel’s national security and key to regional stability.

Seventh, one of the most difficult impediments between the Israelis and Palestinians is mutual distrust and the psychological underpinning of the conflict. It is critical for the US to exert every conceivable pressure on both the Israelis and Palestinians to begin changing their public narratives about each other, ending mutually acrimonious statements, expressions of hatred, and distrust. In addition, the US should insist that both governments encourage universities, nonpartisan think-tanks, and media to begin a process of changing mindsets about some of the inevitabilities which will be required to reach an agreement.

Even if Israeli and Palestinian leaders reach an agreement behind closed doors, they cannot simply come out with pronouncements of concessions that were made without first preparing the public. For example, an agreement on Palestinian refugees might entail the return of only a small fraction of refugees to Israel proper, so as to preserve the Jewish identity of the state, but the vast majority of Palestinians still believe in the right of return. In addition, there can be no two-state solution without East Jerusalem becoming the capital of Israel and Palestine, and though the city will remain united, this will be difficult for the Israeli public to accept. For this reason, the groundwork must be laid concurrently with the resumption of the negotiations, if not before, in order to shift the public narrative and psychologically prepare the populations on both sides to accept the necessary concessions. The willingness to encourage public discourse on these sensitive issues and others will further indicate the extent to which either or both sides are committed to reach a mutually gainful agreement. In addition, to avoid deadlocks, the agreement should be implemented in a number of phases, making sure that any concession made by one side is reciprocated by the other based on prior agreements to gradually engender trust.

The Arab-Israeli conflict has been overshadowed in recent months due to international concerns over Iran's nuclear program, the bloody civil war which continues to rage in Syria, and the unending insurgency and terrorism that continue to plague many nations in the region. Meanwhile, the conflict is quietly simmering underneath the surface and is becoming worse as Israel continues to establish new and expand existing settlements while the Palestinians remain hopelessly factionalized, unable to present a unified front and demonstrate the keenness necessary to make peace to be taken seriously.

Finding a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has gone on for more than sixty years, should now be a top priority for President Obama as it is central to Arab-Israeli peace and will dramatically enhance regional stability. The status quo is not sustainable, and it can only lead to a new violent and perilous conflagration that will leave no victors—only horrifying destruction, irreparably deepening the already existing gulf between the two sides. The United States has both the interest and the responsibility to put an end to a self-consuming conflict in a region where the stakes for all concerned cannot be overestimated.

President Obama may well deserve the Nobel Peace Prize, but by successfully forging peace between Israel and the Palestinians he will have earned it, and that will be his greatest legacy.

**Note:** This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal.

Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/earning-the-nobel-peace-prize/>

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