

The Way Forward in Israeli-Palestinian Relations

Summary of a USIP-Mitvim Institute Roundtable

Jerusalem, Israel; October 28th 2015

As violence between Israelis and Palestinians escalated amid diplomatic stagnation, the [United States Institute of Peace](#) (USIP) and [Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies](#) convened a roundtable discussion in Jerusalem. The discussion addressed questions concerning the way forward through the current crisis as well as steps that the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships, along with the U.S. and the broader international community, could and should take to prevent further bloodshed, while preserving and promoting the possibility of a two-state solution. The discussion took place on October 28th 2015, with the participation of twenty-five experts, predominantly Israeli think tank and NGO leaders, but also including foreign diplomats, and USIP's President Nancy Lindborg. This paper summarizes the analysis and recommendations voiced during the discussion. It does not reflect a consensus of all or even some of the participants or the hosting organizations.

A. Immediate Measures for De-Escalation

The architects of the Oslo process made an error by postponing dealing with the issue of Jerusalem. Since then, we have witnessed a vacuum of leadership in East Jerusalem with no address for the people and authorities to turn to during times of conflict. Therefore, the issue of Jerusalem must be reprioritized in the diplomatic process. Specific measures recommended in this regard:

- Palestinian representatives (possibly from East Jerusalem) should observe the Temple-Mount/Al-Aqsa mosque together with Jordanian and Israeli representatives.
- An infrastructure should be built for local leadership in East Jerusalem (i.e. a council or shadow authority). Israel has an interest in having someone to turn to regarding East Jerusalem. The current impasse could be an opportunity to put pressure on the Palestinian Authority to allow and encourage the East Jerusalem Palestinians to build their own representative body.

- The current tension over the holy sites presents a good opportunity to more deeply engage Jordan, which in turn could catalyze wider regional cooperation over resolving the Israeli Palestinian conflict. Bringing in Jordan on the Temple Mount/Haram Al-Sharif tensions would be in the interest of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as he understands that he needs the Jordanians and prefers dealing with Jordan to dealing with the Palestinians. Possible Jordanian involvement could include Jordanian police units stationed on the Temple Mount. However, such involvement, while potentially constructive must be organized with great sensitivity from the U.S. and Israel, given the complicated relations between the Palestinians and Jordan with regard to the holy sites. It would be important that the Palestinians not feel sidelined.

B. New and Old Paradigms

We are witnessing a reassessment of major paradigms both locally and internationally. The prevailing Oslo order is crumbling under the entrenchment of the Israeli occupation, and questions surround the very viability of the two state solution, and the appropriateness of the U.S.-mediated bilateral negotiation model of reaching that goal.

- The current escalation is symptomatic of a larger problem with the downward trajectory of Israeli-Palestinian relations and lack of progress towards the realization of a two state solution (the stated goal of diplomacy, to date). Therefore, managing the current violence through short term tactical means alone will not be sufficient, and perhaps even detrimental to the ultimate need to recognize and address the larger strategic challenge.
- According to the [2015 Israeli Foreign Policy Index of the Mitvim Institute](#), which polls the Israeli public (Jews and Arabs) on their attitudes towards Israel's standing in the world and its foreign policy, the peace process is still among the three top foreign policy priorities for Israelis. However, the Israeli public believes that the best way to improve Israel's global standing is through improved public diplomacy that better explains its position to the world, rather than through changing its policies with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- There may be a shift in the paradigm away from the two-state solution, with actors that used to see this as the end-goal starting to operate under the assumption that the conflict will end in a one-state situation (whether as a fully democratic state; or as an apartheid state, which is not a viable solution). Some therefore saw the need for a new framework that replaces the old but is short of a one-state solution.

- Most participants in this discussion expressed their views that the two-state solution remains the desired and most viable solution, despite the mounting obstacles. However, there is disagreement regarding the best approach to resolving the conflict. While some are of the view that the gradual approach has been tried for years without success and therefore an end-goal should be put on the table from the very beginning, others argued for a continuing incremental process that advances in small steps while not losing sight of the future vision.
- The U.S. is going through a process of reassessment regarding its approach to the peace process. It is looking at realigning its aid policies, and challenging its longstanding assumptions regarding both substance and mechanics. These assumptions include the belief in bilateral negotiations as the only way forward, and the true meaning of support for Israel in Washington DC. The current state of affairs represents a moment of truth for the U.S.-Israel relationship.

C. International Actors

There are no incentives for international leaders to be pulled into the Israeli-Palestinian issue, especially while many other regional issues take priority on their agendas. Furthermore, it is unclear if there really is an "international community" that is able to have impact. Still, a number of recommendations for the international community emerged:

- Introduce additional, new actors, with wider-ranging interests, into the peace process, especially the Arab states. This could help mitigate the current zero-sum game approach that has characterized bi-lateral negotiations, and introduce new opportunities for incentives. Especially important are the Arab Sunni states that could provide the Palestinian leadership with cover to compromise on certain issues. The Quartet also has a role to play and could strengthen its role by incorporating new actors, especially the Arab states.
- Introduce new concrete steps to change the reality on the ground for the Palestinians, rather than simply renewing the peace process.
- Introduce an internationally-coordinated package of incentives for peace, including security measures that might help persuade Israel to favor a peace agreement, combined with offers by the Arab League and the European Union.
- Many in the discussion voiced that the U.S. and the international community should be using their leverage to support the upholding of democratic ideals and practices in Israel, and to push back against non-democratic practices such as depriving Palestinians from East Jerusalem of their residency, or punitively demolishing Palestinian homes. The status quo in Israeli-Palestinian relations and the Israeli security response to the current violence poses a risk to Israel's

democracy. If Israel's democracy deteriorates, Israel will lose the common ground that connects it with the U.S. and broader western world.

- The U.S. is inconsistent in its approach to the peace process. At times the U.S. approaches peace as a U.S. national interest. John Kerry has made enormous efforts in the region (though with little to show for it). But at other times the U.S. argues that "external actors cannot want peace more than the parties to the conflict themselves," seeing peace as a local issue. If this is a national interest for the U.S., it must push harder on both parties than it seems willing to do.
- According to public opinion polls, the only time in recent years Israelis and Palestinians thought the two-state solution was possible in the near future was in 2009, when President Obama delivered his Cairo speech. At the time, Israelis and Palestinians thought the new world leader would seriously attempt to resolve the conflict. Inconsistencies in U.S. policy on the matter damaged this image and were interpreted by Prime Minister Netanyahu as a lack of real commitment by the U.S.

D. Israeli and Palestinian Leadership

There is a lack of relevant and functional leadership in both Israel and the Palestinian Authority. While a majority of both publics support a two-state solution, it is up to the leadership to work towards this goal and neither set of leaders is inclined to do this.

- Leaders on both sides don't have the ability to make compromises with their constituencies and there are no prospects for new leaders who may be able to do so. Therefore, there is a need to seek, identify, and collaborate with new potential leaders, especially within communities often marginalized from security and peace matters.
- Political will and leadership is a vital piece of the peacemaking puzzle. It should be noted that a majority of Israelis opposed the Sinai deal with Egypt before it was signed, but a majority favored the deal a day after its signing. In other words the realization that something is possible and the political will of leadership can make a difference.

In Israel:

- **Current Leadership:** Recently Benjamin Netanyahu made clear that his support for the two state solution presented at the Bar-Ilan speech, is no longer applicable. He recently stated that "We will live by our sword forever" and has shown that he is not willing to put forth a hopeful vision for Israeli society. Having been elected several times despite his lack of progress on the peace process, Netanyahu sees no motivation to move forward on the peace process or take proactive initiative.

- **Arab Community:** Measures currently taken by Israeli officials, including the chief of police, targeting the Arab community in Israel and in East Jerusalem, resemble actions that ultimately led to the beginning of the Second Intifada in October 2000. The Arab community is also witnessing serious internal problems, as over 40 people have recently left their communities and joined ISIS. At the same time, following the recent Israeli elections, Palestinian citizens of Israel are now represented by the 3rd largest party in the Knesset. To change the trajectory of violence, Palestinian citizens of Israel and their leaders must be part of any national discussion and the international community must reach out to them. Furthermore, the 13 Arab Members of Knesset cannot make an impact when acting alone. There is a need for a new platform that will enable Zionist Jews and Palestinian citizens of Israel to work together.
- **Marginalized Jewish communities:** The international community should identify and reach out to new leadership within communities in Israel, such as the Russian, Mizrahi, Ethiopian, and Haredi communities. These communities have played a large role in electing and securing recent right-wing coalition governments, and they should partake in matters of peace and security.

In Palestine:

- The current leadership, while supportive of the two-state solution, is no longer relevant or representative of the people. Therefore, the international community must seek to build ties with new potential Palestinian leaders.
- Others at the discussion cautioned that the international community should be wary of interfering with domestic political and societal processes. Past attempts to put in place desired leaders, have not always turned out to be successful and have in some ways fostered greater conflict and division.

E. Israeli and Palestinian Civil Society

Efforts should be made to foster trust-building, dialogue and cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians. Mutual trust is currently at a low-point, civil society organizations are usually incapable of working together, and ordinary citizens do not have opportunities to meet counterparts from the other side. Any political solution will not succeed if there is no trust between the peoples.

- Currently, both Israelis and Palestinians claim that the other side is preventing a two-state solution from becoming a reality. This was underscored in a [2014 University of Maryland public opinion poll](#), conducted in partnership with the United States Institute of Peace, that found that while a majority of Israelis and Palestinians still support the idea of a two state solution along broadly understood parameters, neither side believes it will happen in the near future,

and each side grounds its pessimism in views and actions attributed to “the other side.”

- Therefore, the international community should exert leverage on both Israeli and Palestinian leaders to reach out to the other side, and should put its support behind civil society programs that foster Israeli-Palestinian contact, whether through explicit peacebuilding engagement or through cooperation between the business communities.