

“BECAUSE FAILURE RISKS DEVASTATING CONSEQUENCES, IT IS CRITICALLY IMPORTANT THAT THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE CONFERENCE SUCCEED.”

The following letter on the Middle East peace conference scheduled for Annapolis, Maryland in late November, was addressed by its signatories to President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The statement is a joint initiative of the U.S./Middle East Project, Inc., the International Crisis Group, and the New America Foundation/American Strategy Program.

The Israeli-Palestinian peace conference announced by President Bush and scheduled for November presents a genuine opportunity for progress toward a two-state solution. The Middle East remains mired in its worst crisis in years, and a positive outcome of the conference could play a critical role in stemming the rising tide of instability and violence. Because failure risks devastating consequences in the region and beyond, it is critically important that the conference succeed.

Bearing in mind the lessons of the last attempt at Camp David seven years ago at dealing with the fundamental political issues that divide the two sides, we believe that in order to be successful, the outcome of the conference must be substantive, inclusive and relevant to the daily lives of Israelis and Palestinians:

The international conference should deal with the substance of a permanent peace: Because a comprehensive peace accord is unattainable by November, the conference should focus on the endgame and endorse the contours of a permanent peace, which in turn should be enshrined in a Security Council resolution. Israeli and Palestinian leaders should strive to reach such an agreement. If they cannot, the Quartet (US, EU, Russia and UN Secretary General)—under whose aegis the conference ought to be held— should put forward its own outline, based on UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, the Clinton parameters of 2000, the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative and the 2003 Roadmap. It should reflect the following:

- Two states, based on the lines of June 4, 1967, with minor, reciprocal, and agreed-upon modifications as expressed in a 1:1 land swap;

- Jerusalem as home to two capitals, with Jewish neighborhoods falling under Israeli sovereignty and Arab neighborhoods under Palestinian sovereignty;
- Special arrangements for the Old City, providing each side control of its respective holy places and unimpeded access by each community to them;
- A solution to the refugee problem that is consistent with the two-state solution, addresses the Palestinian refugees' deep sense of injustice as well as provides them with meaningful financial compensation and resettlement assistance;
- Security mechanisms that address Israeli concerns while respecting Palestinian sovereignty.

The conference should not be a one-time affair. It should set in motion credible and sustained permanent status negotiations under international supervision and with a timetable for their completion, so that both a two-state solution and the Arab peace initiative's full potential (normal, peaceful relations between Israel and all Arab states) can be realized.

The international conference should be inclusive:

- In order to enhance Israel's confidence in the process, Arab states that currently do not enjoy diplomatic relations with Israel should attend the conference.
- We commend the administration for its decision to invite Syria to the conference; it should be followed by genuine engagement. A breakthrough on this track could profoundly alter the regional landscape. At a minimum, the conference should launch Israeli-Syrian talks under international auspices.
- As to Hamas, we believe that a genuine dialogue with the organization is far preferable to its isolation; it could be conducted, for example, by the UN and Quartet Middle East envoys. Promoting a cease-fire between Israel and Gaza would be a good starting point.

The international conference should produce results relevant to the daily lives of Israelis

and Palestinians: Too often in the past, progress has been stymied by the gap between lofty political statements and dire realities on the ground. The conference therefore

should also result in agreement on concrete steps to improve living conditions and security, including a mutual and comprehensive cease-fire in the West Bank and Gaza, an exchange of prisoners, prevention of weapons smuggling, cracking down on militias, greater Palestinian freedom of movement, the removal of unjustified checkpoints, dismantling of Israeli outposts, and other tangible measures to accelerate the process of ending the occupation.

Of utmost importance, if the conference is to have any credibility, it must coincide with a freeze in Israeli settlement expansion. It is impossible to conduct a serious discussion on ending the occupation while settlement construction proceeds apace. Efforts also should focus on alleviating the situation in Gaza and allowing the resumption of its economic life.

These three elements are closely interconnected; one cannot occur in the absence of the others. Unless the conference yields substantive results on permanent status, neither side will have the motivation or public support to take difficult steps on the ground. If Syria or Hamas is ostracized, prospects that they will play a spoiler role increase dramatically. This could take the shape of escalating violence from the West Bank or from Gaza, either of which would overwhelm any political achievement, increase the political cost of compromises for both sides and negate Israel's willingness or capacity to relax security restrictions. By the same token, a comprehensive cease-fire or prisoner exchange is not possible without Hamas's cooperation. And unless both sides see concrete improvements in their lives, political agreements are likely to be dismissed as mere rhetoric, further undercutting support for a two-state solution.

The fact that the parties and the international community appear—after a long, costly seven-year hiatus—to be thinking of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is welcome news. Because the stakes are so important, it is crucial to get it right. That means having the ambition as well as the courage to chart new ground and take bold steps.

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