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Change They Can Believe In

To Make Israel Safe, Give Palestinians Their Due

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Summary: If it hopes to bring peace to the Middle East, the Obama administration must put Palestinian politics and goals first.

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Reviving the Middle East peace process is the worst kind of necessary evil for a U.S. administration: at once very necessary and very evil. It is necessary because the festering dispute between the Israelis and the Palestinians in a volatile, strategically vital region has broad implications for U.S. interests and because the security of Israel is one of the American public's most enduring international concerns. It is evil because it is costly and difficult. The price of engagement is high, the chances for a solution are mixed at best, and all of the available approaches carry significant political risks. A string of poor policy choices by the Bush administration made a bad situation significantly worse. It inflamed passions. It weakened the position of moderate Israelis and Palestinians alike. And it reduced the U.S. government's credibility as a broker.

Even without the damaging aftermath of eight misspent years, the Israeli-Palestinian dispute will not be easily settled. Many people have tried to end it; all have failed. Direct negotiations between Arabs and Jews after World War I foundered. The British tried to square the circle of competing Palestinian and Jewish aspirations from the time of the 1917 Balfour Declaration until the ignominious collapse of their mandate in 1948. Since then, the United Nations, the United States, and the international community have struggled with the problem without managing to solve it. No issue in international affairs has taxed the ingenuity of so many leaders or captured so much attention from around the world. Winston Churchill failed to solve it; the "wise men" who built NATO and the Marshall Plan handed it down, still festering, to future generations. Henry Kissinger had to content himself with incremental progress. The Soviet Union crumbled on Ronald Reagan's watch, but the Israeli-Palestinian dispute survived him. Bill Clinton devoted much of his tenure to picking at this Gordian knot. He failed. George W. Bush failed at everything he tried. This is a dispute that deserves respect; old, inflamed, and complex, it does not suffer quick fixes.

As Kissinger has famously observed, academic politics are so bitter because the stakes are so small. In one sense, this is true of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute as well: little land is involved. The Palestine of the British mandate, today divided into Israel proper and the occupied territories of Gaza and the West Bank, was the size of New Jersey. In 1919, its total population was estimated at 651,000. Today, the territory counts about 5.4 million Jews and about 5.2 million Arabs. Two diasporas in other parts of the world -- some 7.7 million Jews and 5.2 million Palestinians -- believe that they, too, are entitled to live there.

But the conflict is about more than land; many people on both sides feel profoundly that a compromise would be morally wrong. A significant minority of Israelis not only retain a fervent attachment to the land that makes up the Eretz Yisrael of the Bible but also believe that to settle and possess it is to fulfill a divine decree. For these Jews, it is a sin to surrender land that God has given them. Although most Israelis do not share this belief with dogmatic rigor, they would be reluctant to obstruct the path of those seeking to redeem the Promised Land.

It may be difficult for outsiders to understand the Palestinians' yearning for the villages and landscapes lost during the birth of Israel in 1948. The sentiment is much more than nostalgia. The Palestinians' national identity took shape in the course of their struggle with Zionism, and the mass displacement of Palestinians resulting from Israel's War of

Independence, or the nakba ("catastrophe" in Arabic), was the fiery crucible out of which the modern Palestinian consciousness emerged. The dispossessed Palestinians, especially refugees living in camps, are seen as the bearers of the most authentic form of Palestinian identity. The unconditional right of Palestinians to return to the land and homes lost in the nakba is the nation's central demand. For many, although by no means all, Palestinians, to give up the right of return would be to betray their people. Even those who do not see this claim as an indispensable goal of the national movement are uneasy about giving it up.

A TALE OF TWO PEOPLES

The conflict is not just fiendishly hard to resolve; history and culture make it difficult for both the Israelis and the Palestinians to make the necessary choices. The two peoples had very different experiences in the twentieth century, but both have been left with a fractured national consciousness and institutions too weak to make or enforce political decisions.

For the Israelis, determining the relationship between religion, ethnicity, and citizenship is a perpetually difficult question. Is the return of the Jews to their ancestral home a basically secular objective with religious overtones, like the goals of other independence movements among minorities in the Ottoman Empire, including the Greeks and the Armenians? Or is it a fundamentally religious project? Other countries face similar questions, but the issue is particularly acute for Israel given its position as the world's only Jewish state.

Another complication is that although the Jews are an old people, the Israelis are a young one. Jews have come to Israel from very different societies and cultures and from all over the world, bringing very different expectations, and they have established a political society as varied and fragmented as their respective histories. Ashkenazim and Sephardim, Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox, secular socialists and secular liberals, post-Soviet Russians: this diversity -- with the tensions it brings heightened by the pressure of Israel's existential anxieties -- is reflected in the country's political landscape. A predictable combination of weak governments and explosive politics hinders decisive official action: more than most, Israel's leaders must keep looking over their shoulders to gauge public opinion.

Israeli society is also traumatized, both by the attempted extermination of Europe's Jews in the Holocaust and the phenomena associated with the Holocaust: the failure of Jewish assimilation, centuries of persecution before the Enlightenment, the world's ghastly betrayal of desperate refugees from Nazi Germany seeking countries to take them in. Jews arriving in Israel from the Muslim world brought their own history of betrayal, discrimination, and victimization -- culminating in what for many was a flight every bit as frightening and impoverishing as anything the Palestinians experienced. Having gotten to what seemed like the last refuge on earth, they then had to listen to calls for its destruction and endure wave after wave of attack. This is not a people that can easily trust. Nor is it one among which discussions of national security can always be conducted in tones of calm reason.

The situation among the Palestinians is surprisingly similar. From its inception, Palestinian nationalism has shifted uneasily between the religious and the secular. Are the Palestinians a distinct national society of Muslims and Christians? Are they part of the worldwide umma (Muslim community)? Part of a broader Arab nation? Even though the traumatic experiences of the twentieth century gave Palestinians of all political and religious leanings a common identity and history -- perhaps the strongest in the Arab world, outside Egypt -- basic definitional questions continue to haunt their national consciousness.

Historically, Palestine was a complex region with many subcultures, and the gradual transformation of the Levant throughout the nineteenth century accentuated its diversity. Christians, Druze, and Jews amounted to about one-fifth of the population. The cities and the coastal plain were dominated by agriculture, European commercial interests, and the cultural and political ferment of the late Ottoman period. Jerusalem, where Muslims lived as a minority among Christians and Jews, followed its own direction, with notable Arab families -- some of whose names remain prominent in Palestinian politics today -- exercising important leadership in much of the area. Peasant communities were oriented toward smaller towns and regional centers such as Nablus. Everywhere, ancient tribal divisions and family rivalries complicated the picture further.

Palestinian history was turbulent in the twentieth century. The nationalist movement against the British culminated not in independence but in the uprooting of half of Palestine's Arab population. Some of the displaced settled in refugee camps; others moved in with relatives in the countryside, as earlier generations had done during previous periods of political tension or economic recession; others still became refugees within the borders of the new state of Israel. The numbers are disputed, but estimates suggest that about 276,000 refugees fled to the West Bank, between 160,000 and 190,000 went to Gaza, and about 100,000 crossed into Jordan. Another 175,000 or so, mostly from the northern Galilee, are estimated to have fled to Lebanon and Syria.

After this, Palestinian society grew even more complex. From 1948 to 1967, the majority of Palestinians lived under

Jordanian rule in the West Bank or Jordan itself, and Gaza was under Egyptian administration. Their economic and social conditions in these areas, as well as in Lebanon and Syria, varied tremendously. In Gaza, virtually everyone was a refugee and impoverished. In the West Bank, refugees were scattered in camps among traditional communities of Palestinians still living on ancestral land. Many of the Jerusalem notables survived with their influence relatively intact, despite losing all their property on the Israeli side of the Green Line. In Jordan and to a lesser extent Syria, Palestinians integrated into their host societies. In Lebanon, they had their ups and downs and now live largely in ghettos with restricted educational opportunities, few economic prospects, and no chance at political participation. Two additional diasporas developed: one, of mostly well-educated Palestinians working as professionals in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere; the other, a smaller group of political and military leaders who later were driven out of Jordan (in 1971) and Lebanon (in 1982) and left Tunisia (in 1994, following the Oslo accords). Partly because of this history, Palestinian society has splintered into many different political, religious, and ideological factions.

In the absence of a state -- or, rather, in the presence of so many different states, none run by Palestinians -- Palestinian political life is chaotic. There is no common educational system and no effective institutions, parliamentary or otherwise, through which consensus can be built and enforced. The tragic division of the Palestinians into a "Hamastan" in Gaza and a "Fatahstan" in the West Bank is only one expression of the nation's splintered politics and institutional brittleness. Palestinians in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria and in the broader diaspora will be essential constituencies when the time comes to enforce the security guarantees Israel will need once a Palestinian state is created. Yet they have no say in the election of the representatives who will negotiate the peace deal on their behalf, and their interests are not necessarily the same as those of the Palestinians in Gaza or the West Bank.

Like the Jews, the Palestinians experienced the twentieth century as a time of betrayal by the international community. The League of Nations awarded Palestine as a mandate to the United Kingdom under terms that explicitly called for the establishment of a Jewish national home but required no consultation with the people of Palestine. The United Nations authorized the territory's partition in 1947 -- again making fundamental decisions about the future of Palestine over the heads of its inhabitants. Since then, the Palestinians have been exploited at virtually every turn, not least by various Arab leaders.

The twentieth century taught both the Jews and the Palestinians that the international community's grand moral claims are mostly hollow, that great powers are cynical and brutal, that international politics is a blood sport, and that, at the end of the day, a people can depend only on itself. And both survived thanks to dogged persistence, violent struggle, and a refusal to accept defeat. The Jews clawed their way out of the ruins of Europe to build a state and then turned it into a regional superpower despite repeated efforts by others to destroy it. The Palestinians created a national movement in the face of disaster, asserted themselves by armed struggle, defended their independence in the harsh world of Middle East power politics, and succeeded in placing their cause on the international community's agenda. Both peoples trust their own instincts much more than they do the promises of any single power or of all the world's powers together. They distrust each other because they know how tough and even how ruthless each of them had to be to survive. And they both understand, as no others can, the bitterness and the intimacy of the unique situation they share.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The incoming U.S. administration of Barack Obama faces a daunting task. It needs to develop a Middle East peace strategy that makes a clear break with the past, that is politically sustainable at home and abroad, that offers real hope for a final resolution, and that in the meantime can bring benefits to the two peoples, the wider region, and the United States itself. But Washington will have only limited options. American public opinion strongly and consistently favors a pro-Israel orientation for U.S. foreign policy, and Israel's friends in the United States can mobilize broad support on short notice. Decades of intensive diplomacy and scholarship have already delineated the possible solutions to the dispute. The outlines of a settlement -- regarding borders, security, refugees, and water rights -- are reasonably well understood by all parties, and Obama cannot do much to change them. He cannot expand the Holy Land to give each people the territory it wants; he cannot create another Temple Mount, or Noble Sanctuary, to give each side its own holy site; he cannot move the al Aqsa Mosque away from the Western Wall.

Still, Washington can change the way that a peace deal is framed and thus make it more appealing to both sides. The Obama administration needs to accomplish a kind of Copernican shift in perception: looking at the same sun, moon, planets, and stars that others have seen, it must reconceptualize the relations among them. In the past, U.S. peacemakers have had an Israel-centric approach to the negotiating process; the Obama administration needs to put Palestinian politics and Palestinian public opinion at the center of its peacemaking efforts.

This will fall well short of a revolution. The United States' goals, and many of its policies, will not change. Its relationship with Israel will stay strong; if anything, it will deepen. But despite their military weakness and their political factiousness, the Palestinians hold the key to peace in the Middle East. And if the United States hopes to create a more

secure and stable environment for Israel, it must sell peace to Israel's foes.

Only clear support for a peace treaty by a solid majority of Palestinians -- in Gaza, the West Bank, and the diaspora -- will bring Israel the security it craves and deserves. When, as will inevitably happen after a deal, armed gangs seek to disrupt the peace, much in the way that Irish ultranationalists continued to fight the British long after Ireland achieved independence, the Palestinian public will have to condemn the violence and support crackdowns by Palestinian authorities. U.S. negotiators during the Clinton administration, assuming that Yasir Arafat, then chair of the Palestine Liberation Organization, controlled Palestinian public opinion, reduced the matter of clinching Palestinian support for peace to getting Arafat's signature on the dotted line. This was a very damaging mistake. Now, the United States must focus on swaying Palestinian public opinion in favor of peace -- especially since current Palestinian leaders have none of Arafat's power or prestige.

This will take work. U.S. diplomacy has for too long overestimated the appeal of a two-state solution among Palestinians and in the broader Arab world. Some polls suggest that a majority of Palestinians in the occupied territories would accept such an outcome -- or, rather, would have accepted it some years ago -- but there has never been much enthusiasm for the proposal. A two-state solution has been even less popular with the diaspora, and today, even some of the proposal's most vocal Palestinian backers, such as the well-respected author and scholar Sari Nusseibeh, are moving away from it.

Not surprisingly, support for the proposal has been strongest in the West Bank and particularly among the relatively prosperous West Bankers and Palestinian Jerusalemites who are not refugees. For such Palestinians, a two-state solution might be a wrenching compromise, but it has its attractions. For those in the camps, and especially those in Gaza, a territory virtually without resources and with few economic prospects under even the most favorable conditions, a two-state solution has fewer charms. The Israelis get security, the Palestinian elite gains power and resources, but impoverished refugees and the diaspora are left out in the cold as new flags fly over the same old camps.

Back in the 1990s, Israeli critics of the Oslo process were fortified by the Palestinians' only partial support for a two-state solution. Would the newly formed Palestinian National Authority have the moral authority, the political will, and the administrative capacity to provide Israel with adequate security against those hard-line rejectionist Palestinians who were sure to repudiate the agreement? In the absence of an effective Palestinian partner, might the agreement -- which called for the withdrawal of Israeli forces and settlers from the West Bank -- undermine Israel's security? Such doubts are still voiced loudly in Israeli politics today, and they continue to complicate the task of any Israeli leader seeking serious negotiations.

But those doubts are not just an obstacle to peace; they indicate a way forward for the United States. To a very important degree, Israeli and Palestinian interests are linked. A peace agreement that does not address central Palestinian concerns will lack the legitimacy in Palestinian public opinion that is necessary to make peace real -- that can give the Palestinian state the authority and support it needs to enforce the peace and protect Israel's security. Unless the Palestinians get enough of what they want from the settlement, the Israelis will not get enough of the security they seek.

This linkage offers a historic opportunity for the Obama administration to improve the chances for peace and to align the United States with key Palestinian aspirations without moving away from or against Israel. To address the Palestinians' concerns about a two-state solution does not mean favoring the Palestinians over the Israelis; it means addressing the justifiable concerns of both thoughtful Palestinians and thoughtful Israelis about the future of their countries. No agreement can offer Israel perfect security -- and neither could permanent occupation of the West Bank -- but an agreement that does not command sustained support among the Palestinians cannot offer Israel much improvement over its current situation. This means that any deal must address the issues of greatest concern to the dispossessed refugees, who best embody Palestinian nationalism and remain the ultimate source of political legitimacy in Palestinian politics. Although some of the most contentious issues dividing the two parties are zero-sum ones, in which any Israeli gain represents a Palestinian loss, and vice versa, significant elements of a compromise solution are not zero-sum. Indeed, by bringing new resources to the table, the United States can make peace more attractive to both parties and ease the path to compromise on even the zero-sum issues for both Israeli and Palestinian leaders.

When he reiterates the United States' support for an independent, viable Palestinian state with borders based on the Green Line, that is, the pre-1967 borders (with minor and mutually-agreed-on modifications), Obama must go further than his predecessors. He must overcome the skepticism created by the Bush administration's empty rhetorical support for a Palestinian state. He must declare that the United States is committed not only to an independent Palestine but also to acknowledging the wrongs the Palestinians have suffered, compensating them for those, and otherwise ensuring a dignified future for every Palestinian family.

To give substance to this pledge, the Obama administration should consult with a wide range of Palestinian groups and other interested parties in order to develop recommendations for concrete U.S. proposals that address key Palestinian

issues. In consultation with U.S. allies in Europe (especially Germany and the United Kingdom, which have special historical interests and ties in the region) and elsewhere, the Obama administration should present an agenda that substantially enhances the value of a two-state solution to both the Israelis and the Palestinians and mount a determined diplomatic effort to reinvigorate direct negotiations between the parties.

FINALLY

What the Palestinians want from peace is, first of all, an acknowledgment of the injustices they have suffered. Israeli and Palestinian scholars have documented many incidents during Israel's War of Independence in which massacres or threats of violence caused Palestinians to flee. Most Palestinians who left their homes and villages to protect themselves and their families were never allowed to return, and much of their property was confiscated by the new Israeli government. It is not a crime for civilians to flee combat, and international law recognizes the right of such people to return to their homes. Enforcing that right has been a centerpiece of U.S. policy in Bosnia, so why, the Palestinians ask, should they be treated any differently? This is a legitimate grievance, and the United States must lead the international community in reckoning with it fully and frankly. Any diplomatic effort hoping to build a secure peace with the Palestinians' support must address this issue.

That said, it would be as unfair to place all responsibility for the Palestinian refugee problem on Israel as it is to overlook the injustices the Palestinians suffered. The Israelis argue that the War of Independence was a fight for survival: here were survivors from Hitler's death camps suddenly facing not only the Palestinians but also the armies of five Arab states. Self-defense, the Israelis argue, justified their actions during and after the war. And although most Israelis acknowledge that wrongs were committed, almost all charge that, faced with similar choices, their critics would have done the same or worse. They are right. The responsibility for the nakba cannot simply be laid at Israel's door.

The United Nations' failure to provide elementary security for both the Arab and the Jewish inhabitants of Palestine as the British withdrew was the immediate cause of both communities' suffering in the late 1940s -- of the initial clashes between them, of the accelerating spiral of violence, of the Arab armies' entry into the conflict, and then of the prolonged period of hostility. Modern Israel should acknowledge and account for its part in those tragic events, but the international community at large must accept the ultimate responsibility for the nakba, solemnly acknowledging the wrongs done and sincerely trying to compensate Palestinian refugees today.

PAYING ONE'S DUES

The U.S. government should build on this historical reality to craft an international body that can assume all claims arising from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, adjudicate them in accordance with existing international precedents and law, and pay appropriate compensation to the claimants. Claims would include the losses suffered by Palestinians as well as those sustained by Jews forced to flee their homes in the region, but the system should be set up so that Jewish and Palestinian claimants do not compete for limited funds. This entity should be funded by the international community, with Israel making a substantial payment as part of whatever negotiated legal agreement creates the new body.

The expense will be significant; according to the Aix Group, an economic forum comprising Israeli, Palestinian, and international economists and policymakers, the total potential costs of compensation to Palestinian refugees can be estimated at \$55-\$85 billion. The Obama administration should work with U.S. allies and partners to fund the claims authority. The United States' contribution should be appropriately large, in order to demonstrate Washington's renewed determination to lead the effort to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The exact U.S. contribution should be determined as part of Washington's diplomatic effort to establish and fund the claims organization, but one possible model might look to a division of responsibilities in which the United States, Europe, Israel, member states of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and the rest of the world (principally Japan, other East Asian countries, and other countries with strong interests in resolving the conflict, such as Australia, Canada, and Norway) would each assume a roughly equal share of the financial cost involved in funding a combination of compensation and humanitarian programs for the victims of the conflict. Under this program, the United States would make the largest contribution of any single country (with the possible exception of Israel), but the burden would also be widely shared among the many states that are concerned with stability and justice in this vital part of the world.

Although the certification and payment of claims will require complex procedures, and although the payment of compensation should be part of a multistage implementation of a final and comprehensive peace agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians, the claims entity should begin to review and certify claims while negotiations are still under way. As quickly as the legal and institutional frameworks can be agreed on and established, refugees ought to be able to submit their claims, and those claims should be assessed and certified in a timely fashion. This will help assure the refugees that justice will be done and that the conclusion and implementation of a comprehensive peace agreement would result in tangible benefits.

THE RIGHT OF RETURN

The right of return is one of the tough zero-sum questions that will need to be settled in final-status negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Like the sensitive matter of the holy sites in Jerusalem, this issue is one of the most contentious; it has already been extensively tackled in various informal and "track-two" discussions, and neither side is likely to make an official final offer until very late in the process. Logically, Palestinian acceptance of a two-state solution would imply significant limits on the exercise of the right of Palestinian refugees (and their descendants and heirs) to move within the pre-1967 borders of Israel; if five million Palestinians entered Israel, the Jewish state would have an Arab majority. But it is one thing to draw logical conclusions and another for the Palestinian nation to make a deliberate and serious judgment that painful compromise on this point offers the best road to a just and humane future for the nation as a whole.

As the Palestinian nation grapples with these choices, the United States and the international community can take a number of steps to help the Palestinians make their decision. The key is to assure the Palestinians that the refugees and their heirs will be given several viable options. Palestinians who choose not to exercise their right of return or whose right is in some way restricted in the final Israeli-Palestinian agreement should be substantially compensated by the international community (including Israel) to acknowledge that the right to return is indeed a right and that its loss or restriction entitles the holder to just compensation.

Additionally, the United States and its partners around the world should take steps to ensure that at the end of the process, no Palestinian is stateless and all Palestinians enjoy full economic, social, and political rights. Programs need to be designed to integrate Palestinians in the diaspora into the communities in which they now live, allow them to emigrate within or from the Middle East, and ensure appropriate opportunities for them. Such programs should in no way prejudice negotiations on the right of return, but as Palestinians await the outcome of those talks, the world community must move decisively to create dignified choices for them.

The effort to provide a future for the Palestinians should not be restricted to Arab countries. The United States, Canada, Australia, and European countries, as well as other states around the world, should be prepared to offer immigration visas to Palestinians. Developing countries that agree to receive Palestinians should receive appropriate assistance from the international community; the citizens of poor countries should not feel that their governments are diverting resources in order to house newcomers. Countries such as Jordan and Syria, which have already set the example, should receive compensation as recognition for their past efforts.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF PEACE

The Obama administration will also need to address the structural imbalance of the peace process. Negotiations are front-loaded in favor of the Israelis; by recognizing Israel from the outset, the Palestinians concede Israel's core demand and receive only the right to start talking. The Palestinians have to put the most valuable card in their hand on the table, while the Israelis can keep all their best cards to themselves. At the back end, however, the imbalance is reversed. Here, it is Israel that has to make key concessions: withdrawing from territory, dismantling settlements and military posts, recognizing the Palestinian state. Now, it is Israel who must lay down the cards -- and trust and hope that the Palestinians will reciprocate by providing Israel with the security it craves. (The Palestinians face unpleasant choices at the end also: negotiating over the right of return and agreeing on borders will inevitably disappoint many refugees. However, the Palestinians will reap the rewards of any concessions on these issues once the new state gains control of its territory; the Israelis will still be living in hope that the Palestinians will continue indefinitely to cooperate on security issues.)

This basic imbalance had a serious and negative impact on Middle East negotiations during the Clinton administration. Once Arafat played the recognition card, he needed quick progress on the negotiations and concrete results on the ground to maintain his political position among the Palestinians; Israel, having already gained what it saw as the biggest benefit available, was reluctant to move on to a stage in which it would have to make painful concessions in return for uncertain results. The outcome, amply detailed in Dennis Ross' painstaking and thoughtful memoir, was a relationship between the parties that led to progressively diminishing trust, weakened the political position of peace advocates among the Israelis and the Palestinians alike, and ultimately led to the collapse of the peace process and political victories for hard-liners in both camps.

As the Obama administration moves to rebuild the momentum for peace, it needs to address the imbalances that complicate what would under any circumstances be a tortuous process. It must bring the obligations of and the benefits accruing to the parties into better balance as the negotiations move forward. The Palestinians need from the outset some clearer commitments on both the duration of the talks and the benefits that would result from any agreement; the Israelis need greater assurance that a future Palestinian state would have both the necessary means and the incentives to

deliver on security.

For both parties, solid commitments from the international community on many of the issues that matter most could give the process new credibility and help build the public support needed to make it possible. One goal of the Obama administration should be to develop a package along these lines that encourages Palestinian groups that now reject recognition of Israel to come under the tent; that way, in the next round of negotiations, the Palestinians could present a unified bargaining team broadly representative of key Palestinian political tendencies. Making a peace deal more attractive to the Palestinians and bringing rejectionist political groups into the process would help address Israel's concerns about future relations between the two states. Another goal should be to further assuage Israeli concerns by making payments and benefits to the Palestinians conditional on the Palestinians' full implementation of the agreement's terms. This means that a future Palestinian state would have to meet its security obligations in order to continue to benefit from the provisions of the accord.

The Obama administration should also take steps to build broad public support for a compromise peace in Israel. Once again, it will need support from friends and allies, especially in Europe.

BEING COPERNICUS

Even when Copernicus put the sun at the center of the solar system, he did not forget that he was living on earth. In the same way, shifting Washington's attention toward the Palestinians' concerns would not -- and should not -- mean turning away from Israel. A refocusing of the United States' approach to the peace process would also offer Israel substantial long-term benefits. A decision by the international community to assume the ultimate moral and financial responsibility for the Palestinians' plight would give Israel an opportunity to close the book on Palestinian claims once and for all. Developing and helping fund a mechanism that would also compensate Israeli refugees from the Arab world would address the impression widely shared among Israelis that many states have a one-sided approach to refugee issues. And by making the Palestinians' commitment to peaceful coexistence a key test of the peace process, the Obama administration would be placing the focus where many Israelis think it belongs.

The Obama administration should engage with Israel seriously and candidly to determine what else the United States and its allies can do to help Israel take the risks and make the sacrifices required to give peace a chance. Support for Israel runs very deep among Americans, and it is likely to increase as Israel moves closer to a settlement with the Palestinians. The Obama administration needs to harness that support to help the Israeli government take steps on the sensitive questions of the status of Jerusalem and the status of the territories, steps that an increasing number of Israeli politicians acknowledge must be taken.

The prospect of a just settlement for the Palestinians and an end to the occupation would also open the door to a new age in European-Israeli relations. The United States is not the only country with a stake in bringing this dispute to an end. Washington should work with its EU partners to come up with major new incentives that would convince Israel that the benefits of peace outweigh the costs. The United States should press its NATO allies for conditional assurances that an Israeli-Palestinian agreement would open the alliance's doors to the Jewish state. Closer coordination with and greater support for Israel on the part of key EU countries on Iran policy should also follow. The EU should work closely with the United States to ensure that a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian agreement leads to the recognition of Israel by the members of the Arab League and the normalization of relations between them. Membership for Israel in the Western European and Others Group at the United Nations should also accompany the agreement. The EU should welcome both Israel and the Palestinian state into the European single market as quickly and as thoroughly as possible, providing assistance to both states as necessary.

The Obama administration need not choose the Israelis over the Palestinians or the Palestinians over the Israelis. But it must engage with both sides more deeply than past U.S. administrations have done and use the full power of the U.S. presidency to develop a comprehensive peace strategy. This is one of the most difficult challenges the new president will face, but real progress is possible. At the very least, Obama can change the terms of the debate in the Middle East -- which in itself would be no mean achievement.

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