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Should U.S. impose a Mideast peace?

By Mark Bruzonsky

When the political niceties of this election year fade, the future president must soon confront the new Middle East stalemate.

Tragic events in Lebanon and the possible eclipse of PLO leadership in the Palestinian national movement have not removed the Israeli-Arab conflict from Washington's priority spotlight. Domestic politics during this traditionally superficial election campaign has done that. But it is a deceptive, temporary respite. Serious observers realize that the Middle East party platform planks and the competing verbal platitudes of the candidates address American domestic political concerns, not Middle East realities.

The incoming president will be approaching the Middle East quagmire amidst the increasingly widespread conclusion that the U.S. should urgently pursue an overall Middle East settlement and even consider imposing it. Spelled out, such a settlement usually includes phased Israeli withdrawal from nearly all occupied territories, creation of a Palestinian "entity" or state, a novel arrangement for a united but dually-administered Jerusalem, significant Arab economic and political concessions giving substance to their recognition of Israel, and various forms of specific security arrangements and credible "guarantees" for Israel.

American advocates of such a course are numerous and will surely re-emerge after Nov. 2. Israelis who visit the U.S. are especially sensitive to this trend. In May, for instance, the Israeli-sponsored Israel Digest carried an article by a former director-general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry titled "Will a Middle East Solu-

tion Be Imposed by the U.S.?" Walter Eytan perceptively concluded that while "formerly, any talk of an imposed settlement" was taboo, today such a solution is regarded by most [Americans] as likely, and by many as the only way out of the impasse."

But it remains highly questionable that further escalation of U.S.-Israeli feuding would enhance prospects for peace. Many Israelis might only come to perceive themselves to be totally isolated, defiantly turning to nuclear weapons and electing the right-wing Likud opposition late next year. Many Arabs might include themselves into believing that a tangled American lifeline calls into question the basic U.S. commitment to Israel's warfare.

A far more desirable alternative to the imposition strategy would be a joint U.S.-Israeli initiative to test all possible openings for that elusive path toward coexistence. If this is to be a viable option, though, it must be candidly admitted that one important roadblock is the Israeli Government's reluctance — for reasons of both domestic politics and international geopolitics — to risk offering the specific concessions which could make an historic peace initiative attractive to the Arabs.

The task for the U.S. in 1977 then should be not one of imposing but rather one of convincing — first its Israeli friend of the necessity to firmly reverse the burden of peace with major, historic concessions, and then its new Arab friends that this is a burden they must accept.

Through the use of political, economic, and military inducements the next administration

should persistently advocate mutual concessions. It has become an imperative American national interest to nurture a process of gradual coexistence which "could lead the Middle East combatants to a peace they would themselves create and would want themselves to maintain.

Recognizing the subtle but real distinction between imposing and advocating, the U.S., albeit sympathetically, will have to first apply mounting persuasion to Israel on three crucial matters.

1. Palestinian nationalism must again be recognized as historically and politically legitimate, as it was with the UN partition plan in 1947 which would have divided Palestine into a Jewish and a Palestinian Arab state.
2. This first step would open the door to comprehensive negotiations — at Geneva or elsewhere — aimed at an overall settlement. The Palestinians would deserve separate recognition and the PLO, should it agree to negotiate with Israel at the conference, would undoubtedly make up part of the Palestinian delegation.
3. Israel must be unambiguously prepared to abandon settlements in the occupied territories under appropriate conditions ensuring Israeli security. Some territorial adjustments are certainly possible and a special arrangement for Jerusalem essential — but neither "created facts" (the settlements) nor chauvinistic ideologies (right-wing Zionism as well as the more militant Palestinian outlook)

can be allowed to block attempts at reconciliation.

Once the U.S. and Israel, hopefully acting together, have thus cleared a path to Geneva, a comparable exercise of American diplomacy will be required with various Arab parties. Syria and Egypt must explicitly recognize that Israeli security considerations as well as Israel itself are legitimate. Furthermore, willingness by the Arab states and the Palestinians to begin the long process of creating a normal peace should symbolically begin with stages of progressive economic and cultural contact. Termination of hostile propaganda, demilitarization and arms control agreements, and some form of supplementary American security alliance with Israel will also be required.

Hopefully, Israeli leaders will soon come to agree with Abba Eban, the former Foreign Minister, who insists that "Time is of the essence and unhappily for us, time is running out. We ought to grasp the central issues and involve the United States in resolving them." Hopefully as well, various Arab parties will come to see in U.S. efforts their own enlightened self-interest.

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