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Mark A. Bruzonsky on What to Do About the Middle East

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

He will do so amidst the widespread conclusion that the U.S. should not return to step-by-step diplomacy but should urgently pursue an overall Middle East settlement and even consider imposing it. When spelled out, such a comprehensive, possibly imposed, settlement will include Israeli withdrawal from nearly all occupied territories, creation of a Palestinian "entity" or state, a novel arrangement for a united but dually administered Jerusalem, and various forms of security arrangements and "guarantees" for Israel. For many, the tragic and shocking events in Lebanon have even exacerbated the need for movement toward a new regional status quo.

American advocates of such a course are numerous and vocal. Israelis who visit the U.S. are especially sensitive to this trend. In May a former Director-General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry wrote 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. It is taken for granted that whoever is elected President this November...will not let matters drift as they have for so many years in the past."

The following month Ari Rath, editor of the *Jerusalem Post*, reached similar conclusions after also being chastened by an American visit. "Washington and Jerusalem are...headed toward an inevitable collision," he wrote. "The year 1977 will also be a year of a real American push towards a solution of the Middle East conflict. The U.S. will lean heavily on Israel, even to the extent of imposing a settlement."

Whether or not the next Administration actually chooses and implements such a course, an imposed settlement has at least become one of the options being considered by American policy-makers. It is especially noteworthy that Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Alfred Atherton, delivered something of a veiled warning in June before a B'nai B'rith audience. "Simple logic," Atherton persuasively indicated, "requires us—indeed impels us—to persevere in the search for a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict....It would be tragic if the world community despaired of the hope that Arabs and Israelis could find the answers to their own destiny and concluded that peace should be imposed on the nations of that troubled region."

Attempting an imposed settlement is recognized, even by most advocates, as undesirable. But for many, such a policy is now considered preferable to a new stalemate. This is especially the case now that the lead article in the latest issue of Israel's most important journal of international affairs, *The Jerusalem Journal of International Affairs*, indicates that "Observers with different opinions on the substance and process of the conflict are coming to agree that nuclearization could happen very suddenly, if indeed it has not already happened." As Assistant Secretary Atherton put it: "Whatever the risks of moving toward peace, the risks in not doing so are infinitely greater."

Unfortunately, the very term "imposed settlement" has become an obstacle to the less controversial and more desirable policy of strong attempts to convince both sides of the absolute need to take the risks for peace that could finally lead to an eventual settlement. Persistent advocacy of concessions is not the same as imposing a settlement—though those opposed to such advocacy constantly try to confuse reasonable pressures with attempts at blatant coercion.

The greatest danger is that a real (or even a perceived) U.S. policy shift toward imposition—especially today, in the face of Arab oil threats and Russian military encroachments—might create a negative psychology throughout the region, achieving the very opposite of what was intended. Israel might wrongly come to see itself as totally isolated and might respond by flaunting a nuclear force—as Moshe Dayan and others have been publicly advocating of late. And a number of the Arab parties might delude themselves into believing that Israel's fate was now sealed, its American lifeline tangled, its demise only a matter of awaiting the proper coalescence of circumstances.

Moreover, an imposed settlement would require the cement of a credible American guarantee to counteract expected strains and tensions. There is neither the will nor perhaps even the power in post-Vietnam America to undertake such a long-term protectorate role in such a distant and unstable area. Those who advocate guarantees—as do all who suggest an imposed settlement—have yet to show how such guarantees will be politically possible and strategically effective.

The task for the U.S. in 1977 should not be one of imposing, but rather of nudging, of inducing, and, if necessary, of gently coercing. The U.S. should be a powerful catalyst buttressing both Arab and Israeli moderate positions. Through the use of political, economic, and military inducements, the next Administration should strongly encourage a gradual process of coexistence that could lead the Middle East combatants to a peace they would themselves have created and would themselves want to maintain.

Albeit sympathetically, the United States will first have to apply mounting persuasion to Israel on three crucial matters. For as Rabbi Alexander Schindler (president of the Presidents Conference of Major American Jewish Organizations, the umbrella organization linking nearly all major American Jewish groups) indicates, Israeli leaders "would almost be more comfortable, for domestic political reasons, if the decisions were imposed rather than articulated and accepted from within."

1. Palestinian nationalism must be finally recognized as historically and politically legitimate and U.N. Security Council Resolution 242 modified or reinterpreted accordingly, going beyond "a just settlement of the refugee problem."

2. It follows that at Geneva the Palestinians deserve separate recognition and that the PLO, should it agree to negotiation with Israel at the conference, will undoubtedly make up part of the delegation.

3. Israel must be unambiguously prepared to abandon settlements in all the occupied territories, under appropriate conditions ensuring Israeli security. Minor territorial adjustments are certainly possible and a special arrangement for Jerusalem essential—but both the Arabs and the Israelis need to be fully aware that neither "created facts" (the settlements) nor chauvinist ideologies (right-wing

Zionism, as well as the more militant Palestinian outlooks) block movement toward a settlement.

Once the U.S. and Israel have in this way cleared a path to Geneva, a comparable exercise of diplomacy will be required with various Arab parties. Israeli security considerations must be provided for by Arab concessions, including an end to hostile propaganda, demilitarization of returned territories, arms controls, and supplementary external guarantees. Willingness by the Arab states and the Palestinians to begin the long process of creating a normal peace requires defined stages of progressive economic and cultural contact. Whatever overall agreement may be reached will have to be implemented in stages, as outlined in the 1975 Brookings Report, *Toward Peace in the Middle East*—the most acceptable outline to date of what American Middle East policy should strive to achieve.

It is hoped that Israeli leaders, rather than continuing to throw roadblocks in the American path, will realize it has become preferable to join with a determined U.S. As Abba Eban acknowledges: "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." One hopes as well that various Arab parties will come to see in U.S. efforts their own enlightened self-interest. But lack of cooperation by some of the parties can no longer deter the U.S. The U.S. should pursue this new policy with persistence and determination.

"Peace in the Middle East...is not a promising subject," writes scholar Malcolm Kerr. "Everything in the historical record must encourage the most pervasive pessimism." While an attempt at imposing a settlement is dangerous and not likely to succeed, a decision to use U.S. leverage on all the parties, strengthening the moderate positions on all sides, just might. Most dangerous of all would be the onset of another Middle East stalemate.

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