

A Realistic Strategy for Peace

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A few months ago, Israel was being attacked on two fronts - Lebanon and Gaza - in addition to the ongoing Iranian threats to wipe us off the earth. Now, however, we are being courted by eager peace makers, on both the Palestinian and Syrian fronts, while the Saudi/Arab League grand peace plan has suddenly resurfaced.

Logically, it is easy to reject this surge in activity as empty rhetoric designed to provide the image without the substance of change. Syria's President Bashar Assad appears to be transparently using the language of peace in order to avoid punishment for his involvement in the murder of Lebanese leaders, and for promoting violence in Iraq.

And Palestinian peace feelers would mean more if backed by a serious leader, capable of implementing agreements, preventing terror attacks and returning kidnapped soldiers. Mahmoud Abbas has demonstrated none of these traits, despite numerous opportunities. Both the Syrian and Palestinian talk of peace also appears to be designed to buy time for rebuilding military and terror forces for the next round of attacks against Israel.

But this narrow logic leaves no room for diplomacy or hope for a better future. Some conflicts eventually wind down, after the violence becomes too costly - Northern Ireland appears to be an example in progress, and although there are many differences, there are also similarities. And the rest of the world - particularly Europe, and to some degree, also the US - desperately wants to see progress towards a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni recognizes that in politics, as in baseball, "you can't beat something with nothing." Israeli peace initiatives based on the establishment of an interim Palestinian state, although probably unrealistic, will provide enough motion to prevent another rash of unrealistic European plans and pressure for dangerous Israeli concessions.

THE SUDDEN spike in the peace rhetoric of "moderate" Sunni Arab regimes, including Egypt's military rulers, the Saudi royal family and their counterparts around the Gulf are also based on self-interest. Their survival is linked to restoring a political framework in which radical Islamist groups such as Hamas and Hizbullah are contained. With the implosion in Iraq and the growing threat from Iran as a Shi'ite superpower, these Arab leaders have belatedly realized the need for cooperation with Israel to achieve stability. Pragmatic steps to avoid revolution, rather than a sudden ideological change acknowledging Israel's right to exist, provide the basis for these peace proposals. But they are still too important to dismiss out of hand.

For Israel's part, while skepticism would be advised, particularly after the catastrophic end of the Oslo "peace process," there is also an argument to be made for measures that might reduce the level of conflict for more than a few months. Some Palestinians may well agree with President Mahmoud Abbas that the cost of terrorism is too high, and that Israel is not going to disappear, regardless of these attacks. This is the time for them to be seen and heard, and for Israelis to listen. Competent leaders may yet emerge to take the Palestinian people beyond the ideology of rejectionism, victimization and violence that has gotten them nowhere in 60 years.

In this framework, and in contrast to the emotional enthusiasm that accompanied Oslo, Israel should take limited calculated risks to see how the other players will respond. As the security services lift some of the checkpoints and allow more movement of goods and people, it will be necessary to ensure that this time, these confidence-building measures are not exploited to smuggle weapons or explosives.

A massive release of Palestinian terrorists and their supporters, in exchange for Gilad Shalit, would also be counterproductive, to understate the impact.

The agenda for talks with officials from Bashar Assad's regime should be based on interim and balanced steps to reduce tensions, including ending weapons deliveries to Hizbullah and support for Hamas. Syrian efforts to destabilize Lebanon are entirely incompatible with claims to be interested in peace. (And any academics and journalists who are sent by Damascus to meet informally with their Israeli counterparts will have to shake hands and show that they are serious about ending the conflict.) Talks about the Golan Heights, borders, and access to Lake Kinneret will require a long period of interaction - the terms and conditions under which the previous negotiations took place disappeared long ago.

Finally, if the Saudis and other Arab countries are serious about reviving their long-dormant 2002 peace plan (designed in part to appease US anger after the 9/11 mass terror attacks), they will have to actively sell it. Public visits to Israel to meet with officials are a necessary component, and if the Saudis are not ready for this, they are not ready for peace. Similarly, if they present their framework to Israel as a "take it or leave it" proposal, it will quickly disappear again. Peace, or rather more realistic and pragmatic conflict management measures, needs to be negotiated and implemented step-by-step, with one stage creating the foundation for the next.

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