

ADVERTISEMENT

Ending the Israeli-Palestinian Stalemate Will Strengthen U.S. National Security

We, the undersigned, represent varied intellectual and personal backgrounds, but we all agree that current US Middle East policy is not in the U.S. national interest, not morally defensible, and ultimately not beneficial to the inhabitants of the region.

The United States has two major national security objectives in the Middle East:

1. Winning the global war against Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda terrorist network.
2. Ensuring continued access to Persian Gulf oil.

Both objectives are threatened by the continuing Israeli-Palestinian stalemate.

Ariel Sharon's policies of continuing Israel's occupation of large parts of the West Bank and the consolidation of Jewish settlements there are harming U.S. interests in the Middle East. The inability of Palestinian residents of those territories to determine their own political future increases anti-American sentiments among Arabs and Muslims and makes it more difficult to pursue the war on terrorism. The late Yasser Arafat's inability or unwillingness to contain anti-Israeli violence and focus on preparing the Palestinians for effective self-government also prolonged the conflict, but his passing provides a new opportunity to end this conflict once and for all. We believe that an end to the Israeli-Palestinian stalemate would help Washington advance its global interests in important ways.

A recent series of polls conducted by Shibley Telhami of the University of Maryland and the Brookings Institution makes clear that the United States is deeply unpopular in the Middle East. Even among such traditional U.S. allies as Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, between 79 and 95 percent of the public holds unfavorable attitudes about America. Seventy percent of those respondents explain that their negative feelings about the United States are rooted in the belief that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict persists because the United States supports Israel without reservation.

President Bush has done much to reinforce this belief. He routinely conflates our war against al Qaeda with Israel's struggle against the Palestinians. He has forged political links with some of the most intransigent proponents of "greater Israel." He has adopted a policy of benign neglect towards the continued expansion of Israeli settlements on the West Bank. And he recently endorsed Sharon's proposal to unilaterally annex parts of the West Bank in advance of a comprehensive political settlement.

Americans should be deeply concerned that we are so unpopular in the region inasmuch as it makes it harder, rather than easier, for us to achieve our major national security objectives in the Middle East.

Consider first the global war on terrorism against al Qaeda. While it is true that bin Laden's primary casus belli was not the Israeli occupation but rather the presence of "infidels" in the Muslim holy lands, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict nonetheless undermines our ability to defeat his network. As part of its strategy for winning the global war on terrorism, the United States needs to work together with those Middle Eastern governments that share its geostrategic and geo-economic interests and we also need to discourage individual Arabs and Muslims from answering bin Laden's call to join his global jihad against the United States. The fact that the United States is widely viewed as supporting Israel's continued occupation of Arab lands-including Islam's third-most holy site in Jerusalem-makes it harder for us to find allies in the global war against al Qaeda.

The Israeli-Palestinian stalemate also threatens the West's continued access to the lifeblood of our economy: inexpensive Middle Eastern oil reserves. Recall that it was the Arab-Israeli conflict that first led the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to wield the oil weapon against Western countries thought to be too supportive of Israel. While economic self-interest makes it highly likely that all but the most militant Arab states will continue to sell oil to the rest of the world, the continuing Israeli-Palestinian conflict hinders the trade of an essential resource with an element of political tension that undermines U.S. interests.

There is also the question of the financial burden of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Since 1973, Israel has received directly over \$200 billion in 2001 dollars in U.S. foreign aid, and the indirect costs of U.S. support have likely been considerably higher. The United States continues to spend billions of taxpayer dollars in the Middle East every year, yet peace is more remote than ever and America is not seen as an honest broker. For the good of American taxpayers and in order to be a more impartial force in the region, America should thoroughly re-evaluate its foreign-aid spending in the Middle East.

There is much to be said for less U.S. involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The historical record suggests that the parties seem to make better progress without us and that excessive reliance on the United States diminishes their responsibility for their own future and teaches others that America is the world's policeman. But there is also something to be said for an active -though evenhanded-American role in solving the conflict. Unfortunately, the Bush administration's policies combine the worst features of each approach. Bush has strongly intervened, but only to put pressure on the Palestinians, and he has encouraged Ariel Sharon's Likud government to believe that they will not need to make major concessions on the West Bank.

The signatories recognize that the lingering hostility toward the United States likely will not be resolved by the United States simply washing its hands of the conflict. Therefore, the undersigned urge the United States to assist in negotiating a formal end to the occupation. This negotiated solution should include:

1. A clear and equitable "final status," preferably something along the lines of what the two sides came close to agreeing to at Taba in January 2001, which would have produced an independent Palestinian state on nearly all of the territory of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.
2. International support for Israel's efforts to bolster its security in anticipation of the creation of a truly independent Palestinian state through the construction of a security barrier along the 1967 "Green Line" border, rather than the current barrier which in places runs deep into the West Bank.
3. International encouragement of the Palestinian Authority to develop effective and responsible leadership and assistance to rebuild its government institutions-especially its internal-security forces-so it can take responsibility for governing the territories that will come under its control.

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