

The American-Israeli Alliance under New Administrations: The American Perspective

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Much has happened in this region since I chaired the Sharm el-Sheikh fact finding committee in 2001. Seven years, or even sixty years, is a long time. But consider Northern Ireland, where long time enemies came together to form a power-sharing government. This was almost eight hundred years after Britain began its domination of Ireland, eighty-six years after the partition of Ireland, thirty-eight years after the British army formally began its most recent mission in Ireland, eleven years after the peace talks began, and nine years after the peace agreement was signed. In the negotiations that led up to that agreement we had seven hundred days of failure and one day of success. I spent five years going to, coming from, and working in Northern Ireland, during which I chaired three separate sets of negotiations. For almost all of that time progress was very slow or mostly non-existent. So for those in the Middle East who are discouraged, I understand your feelings. But from my experience in Northern Ireland I formed the conviction that there is no such thing as a conflict that can't be ended. Conflicts are created and conducted by human beings. They can be ended by human beings. I saw it happen in Northern Ireland, although admittedly it took a very long time. I believe deeply that with committed and active diplomacy it can happen in the Middle East.

It has been nearly a decade since the effective end of the Oslo process. Thousands have died. Israel's economy, despite impressive growth, is nevertheless not as strong as it would be without this conflict. The Palestinian economy has been very severely damaged. There are of course many reasons to be doubtful, even skeptical, about the possibilities of an

agreement here. But the pursuit of peace is so important that it demands continued effort, no matter what the difficulties or the setbacks.

One key is the mutual commitment of the parties and the active participation of the United States government, and the many other governments and institutions that want to help. Much is required of leaders who wish to achieve the goal of two democratic independent states living in peace. They must first reconcile the fact that the circumstances and the objectives of the two sides are different. Israel has a state but its people live in unbearable anxiety, so security for the people is an overriding objective. The Palestinians don't have a state and they want one, an independent, economically viable, and geographically integral state; that is their overriding objective.

I believe that neither side can attain its objective by denying the other side its objectives. Israelis are not likely to have sustainable security if the Palestinians don't have a state, and Palestinians will never achieve a state until the people of Israel have some security. With each launched missile or suicide bomb attack the prospect of a Palestinian state is delayed, not advanced. There must be a clear alternative available for the Palestinians that they must seize, an alternative of a non-violent path to a Palestinian state living in peace alongside a Jewish state. Palestinians in turn must accept that the Israeli demand for security is as real and as necessary as is their demand for a state.

Of course this has been and remains American policy. President Bush reiterated that earlier this year in Jerusalem when he said, and I quote:

The point of departure for permanent status negotiations to realize this vision seems clear. There should be an end to the occupation that began in 1967. The agreement must establish Palestine as a homeland for the Palestinian people, just as Israel is a homeland for the Jewish people. These negotiations must ensure that Israel has secure, recognized, and defensible borders. And they must ensure that the state of Palestine is viable, contiguous, sovereign, and independent. It is vital that each side understands that satisfying the other's fundamental objectives is key to a successful agreement. Security for Israel

and viability for the Palestinian state are in the mutual interests of both parties.¹

Unfortunately the positive attitude so carefully nurtured during the previous decade appears to have largely dissipated, replaced by a growing sense of futility, of despair, of the inevitability of conflict. Hamas' electoral victory and its takeover of Gaza create political instability and increasing anxiety. Here in Israel there is political uncertainty as you look toward elections and a new government.

President-elect Obama also said recently that he intends to make progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a key diplomatic priority. He went on to say that his administration will make a sustained push, working with Israelis and Palestinians, to achieve the goal of two states, a Jewish state in Israel and a Palestinian state living side by side in peace and security. I believe that this effort must be determined, backed up by political capital, economic resources, and focused attention at the highest levels of government. This does not mean that it should be an American process or an American agreement. To the contrary, it must be firmly rooted in a shared vision of the people who live here for a peaceful future. But experience has shown that firm, constant, and creative US diplomacy can be helpful. No two countries, no two conflicts are the same. So what happened in Northern Ireland cannot be precisely replicated here or anywhere else. But it does offer an example of what can happen when peace makes a better life possible.

I know that cynicism and fear are on the rise and that it will be very difficult to overcome the obstacles that are many and large. There is much history here to overcome. But there was also a lot of history in Northern Ireland. There, decades of bitter, brutal sectarian warfare had created public attitudes that were deeply negative and filled with despair. Just four days before the agreement was reached, a public opinion poll reported that 83 percent of the public believed that no agreement was possible. Only 7 percent thought it possible; 10 percent had no opinion. But four days later we did get an agreement and it has held.

1. See President Bush's press statement, Jerusalem, January 10, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7182041.stm.

Competing claims, religious differences, and many other factors have led to a grinding, demoralizing, and destructive conflict here. The two sides can continue in conflict indefinitely, or they can find a way to live side by side in peace and with stability. I believe with all my heart and soul that it can be done and it must be done, for the alternative is unacceptable and should be unthinkable.