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Toward Resumption of Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations

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The intensive diplomacy conducted by US Secretary of State John Kerry in recent months has finally produced a cautious announcement about a return to the negotiating table. Against the backdrop of European Union economic sanctions, the renewal of talks after years of a political stalemate is a welcome development. Presumably existing official outlines will be placed on the negotiating table: the Clinton parameters from 2000, the 2003 Quartet Roadmap, the Olmert proposal to Abu Mazen from 2008, and the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, with its subsequent clarifications. However, the chances today that a comprehensive, long term solution to the core issues – Jerusalem, refugees, borders, security – can be found, and that on this basis the conflict can be ended, are slim at best.

Meanwhile, the campaign for the delegitimization of Israel has gained international traction, as has recognition of a Palestinian state that has not been established on the basis of an agreement. Ongoing construction in the settlements makes division of the land between two nation states less and less feasible. The moderate Palestinian partner for negotiations, the Fatah movement, is weakening internally, while at the same time extremists in the Hamas leadership are increasingly vocal. In addition, the strengthening of the public in Arab countries identified with political Islam is cause for concern. In order for Israel to anchor its long term national interest as a Jewish democratic state, it must pursue separation from the Palestinians and delineate the country's borders, either through negotiations or independently, all in coordination with the international community. At the same time, an internal Israeli dialogue is needed to prepare the public and the essential national infrastructure for the process of gradual separation from the Palestinians.

In order, therefore, to progress toward a long term political settlement and to shape the desired situation of two states for two peoples, partial agreements, interim agreements, and coordinated independent actions by both sides will be needed. These steps will help allay the mutual suspicions of Israeli and Palestinian leaders, and no less important, are likely to aid in confidence building between the two societies and ultimately increase

essential public support for the respective leaders to advance toward a long term settlement.

On the regional front, Israel should communicate with heads of leading Arab League states. It should convey its willingness in principle to recognize the Arab Peace Initiative as a basis for launching talks to promote agreement on a comprehensive multilateral framework for dialogue about steps by Israel and the Palestinians to change the reality. The main advantage of this approach lies in its chances of leading to improved management of the conflict in the first stage, in parallel with the bilateral talks, and in the second stage, of creating a basis for negotiations with the Palestinians on a permanent settlement and regional dialogue with other Middle East actors.

Gradual, cautious progress toward separation from the Palestinians and the delineation of the country's borders make it necessary for Israel to retain the political initiative. From Israel's point of view, there is no longer room to be passive and await steps by the other party or by third parties, as happened last week with the Europeans. It is preferred that Israel act simultaneously along two tracks. The first highlights agreement, namely, the process led right now by Secretary of State Kerry, which should include (1) negotiations whose ultimate objective is a long term political settlement; (2) interim agreements in preparation for implementation of the agreed long term settlement; and (3) regional multilateral dialogue. The second track is an independent Israeli initiative to delineate the provisional border, preferably through cooperation and coordination with the Palestinian Authority.

The proposed formula for progress is to implement each step that contributes to two states or an agreed outline toward this end. Along with the talks, it is also worth reconsidering the overall policy toward the Gaza Strip and making use of third parties in order to overcome violent crises and deepen security understandings between Israel and Hamas.

If the gaps and the obstacles overcome the attempt to promote a political settlement in negotiations, or if the situation escalates sharply, decision makers in Israel will have to act to promote an independent separation initiative with the goal of creating a reality on the ground of two states for two peoples. It would be preferable to have the cooperation of the Palestinian Authority, even though implementation will not be dependent on it, and to coordinate action closely with the US administration.

Preparations should be made for the day on which residents of settlements are called upon to return to the borders of the State of Israel, be they delineated in an agreement or through an independent Israeli decision. In order to avoid a domestic conflagration, the Israeli government should give serious thought to how to change the discourse with the settlement population. This would expand public support for the two-state solution, cast

the evacuation as a unifying move and not as the government's dissociation from an important Israeli constituency, and justify enforcement and evacuation by force if necessary.

National deployment for separation into two nation states in an agreement that comes about through negotiations or an independent Israeli decision requires that Israel make preparations to relinquish territories outside large settlement blocs, however they are defined, and maintain these key blocs as an integral part of Israel, in exchange for a land swap. Such deployment could be based on preparation of a national plan to absorb the settlement population, enactment of a voluntary evacuation law, compensation and absorption of those living outside the settlement blocs, an internal discussion to prevent domestic conflagration, and plans to leave the IDF in areas and at sites defined on the basis of security needs.

Israel will retain control of the "security envelope" and the external borders of the territories that will be evacuated. In any case, the independent steps taken at Israel's initiative will only take place when decided on by the government after it has made appropriate arrangements and done its best effort to negotiate an agreement. If the current effort to reach understandings with the Palestinians also fails, recurring attempts should be made. However, in such a case, Israel should consider starting to implement independent measures in a gradual, controlled, and intelligent fashion while examining the impact of each of the steps before proceeding to the next step.

From the outset of the Oslo process twenty years ago, Israeli governments have declared their support for the principle of two states for two peoples, and have worked – some more, some less – to implement it through negotiations or unilaterally. The current government headed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has declared that this is its political objective. This strategic principle is geared toward preserving a substantial Jewish majority under an effective democratic government. It is intended to avoid the risk to the Zionist vision in the form of a bi-national state, the demographic threat, and the "right of return." The negotiations that are about to start rely on the rationale of each of the previous rounds of diplomacy: ensuring the future of the State of Israel as the secure, democratic nation state of the Jewish people. At stake is an historic compromise, whose essence is territorial division of the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea into two nation states.