

## NEGOTIATING AN ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN BREAKTHROUGH

Alon Ben-Meir – February 2nd, 2009

### **Abstract**

The difficulty in concluding an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement lies in the internal and psychological struggle resulting from decades of debilitating conflict that has left both sides weary about future co-existence. The absence of trust, the prevalent internal political division, and the existence of extremist groups in both communities remain a major obstacle. Moreover, the lack of consistent, active and direct American involvement coupled with ineffectual prodding by Arab states has prevented significant progress in ending the conflict. With the changing political and demographic dynamic between Israel and the Palestinians and the advent of a new American administration, a new government in Israel and Palestine and a renewed push of the Arab Peace Initiative, an Israeli-Palestinian peace can be reached. The question now is will all these forces coalesce to drive for a peace agreement now which has eluded them for decades.

During more than four decades of occupation, Israeli-Palestinian relations have been replete with intense violence and mutual recrimination, which on more than one occasion has brought them to the brink of all out war. Oddly enough, these years have also been signified by the transformation of the conflict whereby both sides have edged ever so slowly toward accommodation. But forty years of occupation and its accompanying violence has created psychological and emotional hang-ups that continue to haunt both sides and hamper major progress on key security and territorial related issues critical to finalizing an agreement. Moreover, while there is clear evidence that the vision of a two-state solution is gaining more currency; there are still entrenched extremist groups such as Hamas and radical settlers who continue to seek all of Palestine or greater Israel respectively.

The recent war in Gaza between Israel and Hamas has made the issue of dealing seriously with violence and retribution more pressing than ever. Operation Cast Lead, provoked by Hamas' endless rocket fire on Israel resulted in the death of over a thousand Palestinians, a majority of which were civilians. If the new US leadership—under the

guidance of Middle East Envoy George Mitchell—does not deal hastily and directly with the issue of violence, the next war could just as well generate another dismal outcome. If the war in Hamas has produced anything it is a window of opportunity for Israel, its Arab neighbors, and its international allies to confront directly the sources of violence, bring an end to the occupation while Israel still has neighbors willing to cooperate.

There is nothing that can justify a humiliating occupation in the mind of the Palestinians, and all moral arguments against occupation are readily dismissed in the face of existential threats in the mind of the Israelis. Even a cursory review of the occupation from the Israeli vantage point indicates that for many Israelis and especially the religiously committed settlers, the occupation of the West Bank is a biblical fulfillment that no government has the right to alter and no resistance, however violent, can change. The settlements and their expansion during the seventies and the eighties became central to government policy in the territories and the settlement movement developed a strong political constituency represented in all Israeli coalition governments. Successive Israeli governments have provided financial means and protection to the settlers with near utter disregard to the profound impact on Israeli-Palestinian relations. As a result, any Israeli peace overture under these circumstances has been viewed by the Arab states as an empty slogan and a cynical attempt to sway public opinion. Contrary to the facts on the ground, as the occupation becomes less and less tenable, Israeli governments continue to justify it as indispensable to national security in an effort to justify further entrenchment.

Most Palestinians see the land on which they have lived for centuries as theirs, and no ruler or government can compromise this inherit right. From their perspective, regardless of what precipitated the Israeli occupation, Palestine is an Arab matrimony and

thus their right to the land is not only historical but real and inalienable. Although the occupation may have needlessly been perpetuated by the Arab states and Palestinian leaders, who rejected Israel's initial offer to exchange all the territories for peace immediately after the 1967 war, the occupation nonetheless has become central to Arab discourse. Everything from national dignity, daily struggle and physical survival are often linked to the recovery of the land. More than seven out of ten Palestinians have been born under occupation, creating two generations of Palestinians bent on ending it at whatever cost. Violent resistance to the occupation is only natural: as the former Israeli president Moshe Katzav once said, regardless of who is right or wrong, the occupied has every right to resist. As a consequence, resistance to the occupation has created a vicious cycle of retaliations causing more pain and suffering to the Palestinian community. The despicable condition of the Palestinians languishing in refugee camps provided the environment for the birth of radical Islamist groups, including the creation in 1977 of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas). Over time, Hamas has begun to mobilize its followers to rally violently against the occupation, linking national redemption to the liberation of the land.

While violent resistance to the occupation has further deepened the settlers' resolve to fight back, both Israeli and Palestinian radicals see salvation in resisting the existence of the other. Absorbed by illusions and false prophecies, these radicals still believe that they can defy what history, political reality and changing circumstances have finally formulated. Trust hardly exists, and horrifying scenarios are constantly drawn about each other's ultimate intentions reinforcing the instinct to fight. The bloody conflict has hardly spared a single family the anguish and pain associated with the loss of a loved

one or someone they know. The injury and the losses are more than physical. Every funeral procession of the many thousands who have died on both sides has engendered new vows to revenge, a call for reprisal and ever more painful retribution. A vicious cycle of violence has become the natural order consuming two generations of youth whose hopes and dreams are lost in a political abyss. The wanton killings, suicide bombings and the sweeping retaliations throughout the second Intifadah, following the collapse of the Camp David negotiations in the summer of 2000, have robbed the last semblance of civility, leaving both sides scrambling for answers to the one daunting question: where do we go from here, when all roads seem to point to the precipice?

But after six agonizing years the answer has become gradually clear to a majority of Israelis and Palestinians who believe that neither side can improve their position through the continuation of the conflict and there is no place to go but coexistence. Many Israelis admit that after forty years of occupation, neither territory nor military power has offered Israel the peace it yearns for, and the country is still facing the same three grim choices. The expulsion of Palestinians, as some Israeli radicals have advocated, has been largely rejected on moral grounds and fear of international condemnation and potentially unimaginable consequences. Maintaining the occupation is clearly unsustainable because of the raging violence and the continuation of the state of war with the Arab world, and lastly, annexing the territories has presented Israel with two unacceptable choices: either deny the Palestinians equal political right and thereby render Israel an apartheid state, or grant them equal rights and thereby lose the Jewish national identity of the state almost overnight. In that sense, the second Intifadah provided the Israelis a rude awakening and made the remaining option of a two-state solution the only sane choice.

A majority of Palestinians too have gone through serious reflection and have come to accept that the second Intifadah was a tragic mistake, as Israel decimated the Palestinian security forces and laid their infrastructure in ruin. The violent resistance to Israel's existence has left most Palestinians despairing with no prospect for better life any time soon. Torn between this mindset and the desire to reconcile is where the Israelis and the Palestinians are found today and what the Obama administration faces as it embarks on its daunting mission.

### **The changing dynamic**

Four dramatic developments however have taken shape during the past several years which have changed both the conditions on the ground as well as the regional geopolitical environment. These changes appear to have had profound influence on both the Israeli and Palestinian disposition, making the need for mutual accommodation based on a two-state solution central to their strategy.

First, most Israelis have finally come to the conclusion that occupation is not sustainable if for no other reason but demographic reality. It took more than thirty five years for the Prime Minister and Likud Party leader Ariel Sharon to concede that the number of Palestinians living in Israel proper plus those living in the West Bank and Gaza is already equal, if not exceeding, the number of Israeli Jews living in Israel. This factor, in and of itself, forced the Israelis to conclude that in order to prevent the erosion of a Jewish majority in Israel, the two-state solution remains the only viable solution that could insure the national Jewish identity of the state. Against the objection of many

members of the Likud Party, Sharon, as a part of his plan to end the occupation, withdrew all Israeli settlers and military installations from Gaza. The rift with Likud forced Sharon a few months later in 2005 to form the Kadima (forward) party. Central to the platform of the new party was Israeli unilateral withdrawal from the vast majority of Palestinian territories. The fact that Sharon—the father of the settlement movements—came to this conclusion represents a sea of change in Israeli thinking and has set in motion a process that will continue regardless of who leads the new Israeli government.

Subsequent to the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, Hamas used the territory as a staging ground for attacks against Israel. While this discredited the premise of unilateral withdrawal, it did not alter the principle of ending the occupation and the establishment of two states. Israel simply miscalculated Hamas' strength and popularity in Gaza, and the friction between the Palestinian Authority (PA) led by Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas. The fact that Hamas is currently in control of Gaza did not stop the Israelis from continuing the peace negotiations with the PA toward the same goal.

Second, after decades of violent resistance that has claimed the lives of thousands and left much of the Palestinian community in despair, a majority of Palestinians have reached the point of exhaustion. In fact, the actual political rapprochement between Israel and the Palestinians began as early as 1988 during the waning days of the Reagan administration. At that time, the late Prime Minister of Israel Yitzhak Rabin recognized the PLO under the Chairmanship of Yasir Arafat as the sole representative of the Palestinian people and in return Arafat recognized Israel's right to exist, renounced terrorism and pledged to reach a peaceful solution through negotiations. The 1992 Madrid Peace Conference further promoted the concept of a two-state solution and it was

subsequently followed in 1993 with the Oslo accords. Although intermittent and often intense violence continued to blur the vision of the ultimate solution, even among the extremist Palestinians the number of those who believed in Israel's ultimate destruction diminished substantially. A solid majority of Palestinians have concluded that Israel cannot be defeated militarily any time in the foreseeable future, and they must now find a way to live side-by-side with it.

Third, the Arab states have too come to the same conclusion. Peace with Israel is now being viewed as a strategic option in the wake of the Iraq war and reinforced by the Gaza war and Iran's regional ambitions. In March of 2002 the Arab League passed an historic resolution known as the Arab Peace Initiative in Beirut, Lebanon and reintroduced it in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in March 2007. The resolution called on Israel to return the territories captured in the 1967 war in exchange for a comprehensive peace with all 22 Arab states. To better understand the significance of this resolution is to compare it to the 1967 Arab League resolution in Khartoum, Sudan which stated its policy toward Israel as no peace, no recognition and no negotiation. Moreover, the fact that this Initiative is Arab in origin and represents the collective Arab will embodies a major departure from past policies toward Israel. Although other provisions in the Initiative concerning the Palestinian refugee's right of return and designating East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state prevented Israel from fully embracing it, the Initiative remains far reaching in its implications. It has signaled to all Arab and Muslim extremists that the Arab-Israeli conflict is no longer an ideological or religious conflict but political and territorial in nature which can, and must be peacefully reconciled.

Fourth, the prospect of the Obama administration offers another momentous opportunity to change the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East in a way that can accelerate regional peacemaking. As the United States turns to repair its reputation and its dangerously low esteem in the region, it must first make a determined effort to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Unlike the Bush administration which largely left the Israelis and Palestinians to their own devices, the Obama team seems to be fully cognizant of the need for the United States to interject itself immediately into the peace process, as Mitchell is already preparing his second trip to the region. America is the only nation that has the sway on both sides to induce the necessary Israeli and Palestinian concessions vital to arriving at a peace agreement. To that end, there are a number of essential strategic steps and requirements that the United States must pursue simultaneously.

#### **Immediate and direct involvement**

Unlike Presidents Clinton and Bush who plunged into the Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking only during the final year their administrations, President Obama should tackle this conflict head-on during his first few months in office. Although no major breakthrough was achieved by the two previous administrations, a significant progress nevertheless was made from which a framework for a peace based on a two-state solution has emerged. The existence of rejectionist elements among the Israelis and the Palestinians who are hard at work to undermine the peace process makes it doubly urgent not to allow a vacuum in the peace negotiations. Whether it is the Clinton Parameters or the Road Map, the Obama administration is inheriting a clear formula for peace that can be pieced together provided a determined effort is made and unabated momentum is kept. To succeed, the United States must become actively and directly involved and remain

relentless in the pursuit of a peace agreement which both Israelis and Palestinians can accept and build upon.

### **Appointing a permanent envoy**

The one element that has constantly been missing in past US mediation between Israel and the Arab states is the permanent presence of a Middle East envoy with the President's confidence and a wide mandate to facilitate agreements. More than a dozen envoys or emissaries traveled to the Middle East during the Bush administration alone including General Zinni and General Jones, George Mitchell, George Tenet, and William Burns as well as the Secretaries of State. Yet none stayed long enough or remained sufficiently engaged and resilient enough to achieve a breakthrough. President Obama's appointment of George Mitchell, a trusted envoy with access and leverage is a positive indicator for progress in this direction. His work in brokering the Good Friday Agreement proves he is a tough negotiator and a strong advocate of direct diplomacy and his 2001 report on the Israeli-Palestinian crisis ensures that he has the background and objectivity to take on such a task. The job at hand will require deep understanding of the history of the region, the roots of the conflict and appreciation of the religious convictions and cultural orientations of the people involved, which Mitchell undoubtedly has a firm grasp on thus far. The envoy must be sensitive and fully cognizant of the idiosyncrasies of the conflicting parties and their psychological state after sixty years of violent conflict. Moreover, Mitchell must be clear about the concessions that must be made by both sides and demonstrate an iron will to follow through. Both the caliber and experience of the envoy will be significant in this case, as they must carry out tough policymaking decisions. Both Israelis and Palestinians need direct and persistent American involvement

and pressure to justify to their own public the concessions they have to make to achieve a just peace.

### **Apply tough love in dealing with Israel**

Although the United States' commitment to Israel's national security must remain unshakable, the Obama administration must be firm with Israel in addressing the conflict with the Palestinians. Past blanket support of Israel's policies by successive administrations that have not pushed against the building and expansion of settlements has done more harm to Israel than good. While Israel is a fellow democracy besieged by enemies and a majority of the Americans sympathize with its struggle, the affinity to Israel should be viewed in the context of what is truly best for it. This is not a question of a mere evenhandedness in dealing with Israel and the Arab states, as Israel's military needs and requirements to survive are entirely different from other nations in the region. It is a matter, however, of reconciling Israel's core requirements for peace with the emerging consensus of a two-state without compromising its national security. In this regard it will be essential that the Obama administration not only endorses the Arab Peace Initiative but persuades Israel to embrace it as well. This must constitute a point of departure as the best and the only solution as Israel's ultimate security lies in peace not in territory.

### **Prodding the Israelis and the Palestinians**

The United States should bring necessary pressure to bear on both Israelis and Palestinians to change the nature of their daily encounters and overall relationship. The US must become very active and push hard to reduce their differences by focusing on building trust and confidence to both ends. The Obama administration must insist that

both sides begin with public diplomacy, which is sorely absent in the current atmosphere. To mobilize public opinion in favor of two states the public must see, hear, and feel the benefit of what might one day be realized. Israeli and Palestinian leaders must first state and restate openly and unequivocally their commitment to a negotiated settlement under any circumstances. A growing majority in both camps will believe in the inevitability of peace only when the leaders are willing to stake their political future with peacemaking. Government organs must not only refrain from attacking and condemning each other, they must promote day in and day out in print and electronic media the prospect of coexistence in peace and prosperity. As both sides build the structure of peace, the public will develop a vested interest in the process itself and hold more stake in it. Moreover, they must learn to deal tactfully with the difficulties that will inevitably arise from acts of wanton or accidental violence by hard core Hamas' adherents or radical settlers. In the end, winning each other's public opinion remains central to building a solid majority in support of peace and on that score the United States must remain relentless. This may not stop extremist groups from disrupting the calm but it will substantially strengthen the camp that seeks a peaceful settlement and minimize the chances of another outbreak like the one in Gaza.

To be effective all public diplomacy must be supported by irreversible confidence building measures on the ground. This must include substantial reductions in the number of road blocks, ending public incitements by the Palestinian media against Israel, and enhancing civil relations. This should also include allowing humanitarian aid, medical supplies, and building materials to pass through to aid the citizens of Gaza. To rebuild confidence both sides must make it possible for a greater number of people-to-people

interactions on a variety of levels including allowing an increasing number of Palestinian workers into Israel while Israelis undertake joint sustainable development projects in the Palestinian territory. There will always be certain security risks involved when increasing the number of daily interactions. Such risks however must be weighted against the enormous advantages resulting from people-to-people bridge building. Another dramatic gesture that Israel must consider is the release of substantial number of Palestinian prisoners in the range of five thousand or more to send a loud message that Israel is bent on reconciliation. Why hold more than 10,000 prisoners at a terrible cost when all that Israel gets in return is more resentment and mistrust?

The one overriding requirement to instill a real sense of confidence is ending all settlements activity until an agreement on the final border has been established. The largest impediment to the prospect of a two-state solution is the building and expanding of settlements. Israel cannot talk in earnest about peace while it continues its settlements activity, especially around the old city of Jerusalem. To establish a real trust in the peace negotiations, Israel must end its expansion of existing settlements including those that will eventually be incorporated into Israel proper by mutual agreement with the Palestinians. Since the need for expanding some of these settlements to accommodate natural growth could be pressing, the focus in the negotiations must be on the final status agreement. In order not to prejudice, however, either the Israeli or the Palestinian positions (Israel does not want to concede on the status of these settlements and the Palestinians want to establish the 1967 border as the point of departure for the negotiations on the final borders) a time limit for the final status negotiations will have to be established in advance.

From the Arab perspective the building and expansion of settlements around Jerusalem intends to prevent the Palestinians from establishing their capital in East Jerusalem, which severely stifles any prospect of making peace. Most Arab states find it extremely difficult to reach out to Israel or put pressure on Arab extremists when illegal settlements are condoned on a daily basis. Moderate Arab states including Egypt, Saudi and Jordan have cooperated and stood up against extremism are running out of patience. Israel must reach out to those allies by temporarily suspending the settlement activity which may be a small price to pay to maintain their support and keep the radical elements at bay. The United States must be clear and unequivocal as settlements activity has hovered over every fragment of confidence building in the past.

### **Maintaining security**

The linchpin to maintaining steady progress in the negotiations and in confidence building is making supreme efforts to end all forms of violence. There are three sets of security arrangements that the Obama administration must pursue: full cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian security forces, augmentation of the Palestinian Authority security forces, and the establishment of an international peacekeeping force under US auspices.

Cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian security forces is fundamental to any future progress in the peace process. Before Israel can relinquish territory in the West Bank, it must be assured that the Israelis will not become a target and that the Palestinian security forces will be relentless in foiling any plot of violence against Israelis. Israel must reciprocate by ending targeted killing and the practice of home demolition. Full collaboration between the two security forces will send a clear message that Israelis and

Palestinians will act decisively in confronting violence. In this regard, Israel must apply and enforce laws against settlers who violate Palestinian rights or safety, which has been common in the recent months. The full cooperation between the two security forces as was demonstrated so aptly in Jenin, Hebron and soon in Bethlehem attest to future possibilities. Trust between security forces is fundamental to progress made on every other level of interaction. It demonstrates more vividly than anything else both sides' commitment to reduce tension while providing the building blocks for a sustained relationship.

As a part of any future security arrangement the United States must strengthen the security forces of the Palestinian Authority by providing the necessary military hardware and facilitate the training of new recruits on a regular basis. Although the United States has done some of this in the past, it will be necessary to augment such a program to ensure that the Palestinian Authority will be in a position to deter and prevail should violent confrontation with extreme Palestinian elements erupt. The prospect of re-establishing a unity government between the PA and Hamas should not alter the principle to keep Palestinian moderate forces robust. Although the Israelis remain deeply troubled by what happened during the second Intifadah when Palestinian security forces turned their guns against them, the Palestinian Authority has learned its lesson as they know full well that while they can inflict serious loses, they can be destroyed in the process.

As a part of an overall arrangement, the Obama administration must also negotiate the establishment of an international peacekeeping which may include Arab peacekeeping forces from leading moderate Arab states including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco to be stationed especially along the Gaza borders. United States may

augment such a force by providing elements of command, control, and monitoring. Under the best of circumstances any Israeli-Palestinian peace accord will take a number of years before it becomes entirely secure and would need strong international and Arab states' presence to stabilize it. Yet other than its symbolic importance, the presence of such a force will have a tremendous affect on public behavior as it sends a clear message that the entire Arab body stands behind the peace agreement. As a part of the Arab Peace Initiative it reassures Israel that the Arab states take Israel's national security seriously and they will be prepared to confront any extremist group that attempts to undermine the peace process. Unlike a pure peacekeeping from outside the region, an Arab peacekeeping force will enjoy greater latitude in dealing with irredentist Islamic groups who are likely to resist, at least initially, any peace agreement with Israel.

#### **Offer Arab extremists a choice**

Many people will think that some of these groups such as Hamas are irredeemable and the only language they understand is the iron fist. President Obama stands a uniquely better chance than any of his predecessors to reach out to some of these groups and persuade them to join the Arab moderates and the process of peace. Other than the very hard core Islamists, given the opportunity and the prospect of living with dignity, the majority of extremists is not ideological and would join the Arab center. To be sure, if the Obama administration wants to change the political dynamic it cannot exclude any player and it must insure that everyone has stakes in the process. Hamas and others should be offered to join the political process but they will have to know that it is they, not Israel, who needs recognition. In the wake of the Gaza war they may well better understand that *they* have to ultimately choose between political existence or settle for marginalization at

best. This is why it is imperative that all Arab states be fully supportive of the Obama strategy and why these radical groups must also know that in any future confrontation with the Palestinian Authority they will handedly be defeated.

### **Embracing the Arab Peace Initiative**

The Obama administration must embrace the Arab Peace Initiative as it offers a comprehensive approach and induces the Arab states to play a direct and active role in the process. Although the Road Map was a useful instrument and has provided specific steps for both sides to undertake to reach an agreement, it has inherit limitations as it represents another Western design rather than an indigenous Arab formula that resonates more favorably in the Arab street. In any event, regardless of its shortcomings the Road Map and the Arab peace initiative are not mutually exclusive and can work well together to enhance a comprehensive peace plan with both the US and all 22 Arab states. Embracing the Arab Peace Initiative will also send a clear signal to the entire Arab and Muslim world that the United States is fully committed to dealing with the whole range of the Arab-Israeli conflict while signaling to the Islamic radicals that they must now face the collective Arab will.

It is important to note that Syria is one of the signatories of the Arab Peace Initiative and can play a constructive role in the search for solutions to many of the conflicts in the region; in Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Iraq and Iran. Syria is eager to demonstrate that it is worthy of engagement and the Obama administration must take the initiative and put Damascus to test. Ending Syria's isolation may prove to be critical to Obama's new Middle East strategy. The Obama administration's overture toward Syria is an extremely positive move and the negotiations between Israel and Syria with direct

U.S. involvement must now be put on the fast track. Indeed, considering the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israeli-Syrian negotiations may prove to be much easier to conclude. An Israeli-Syrian peace deal would provide numerous implications regarding the larger threat of Iran, and will have a direct impact on radical Palestinian groups.

Early commitment of the Obama administration to an Israeli-Palestinian solution must be met by a renewed commitment on the part of the Arab states to translate the Arab Peace Initiative to real measures as well as symbolic gestures to reach out to Israel. In return for embracing the Initiative, the United States should insist that many Arab leaders, especially from countries that have no formal relations with Israel, initiate public contact with their Israeli counterpart. Nothing will sway Israeli public opinion in favor of making the concessions for peace as much as demonstrative public contacts. After nearly thirty years of peace between Israel and Egypt, President Mubarak has never set foot in Israel while his Israeli counterpart visited Egypt numerous times. Imagine the impact of a visit by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia to the Muslim Holy shrines in Jerusalem and to address the Israeli parliament or hold an interfaith conference in Jerusalem. President Obama will be better equipped to persuade Arab leaders in the spirit of the Arab Peace Initiative to make such gestures than any of his predecessors. He has created a sincere aura around him and the Arab leaders are more likely to make such a gesture to President Obama as he himself is investing heavy political capital in the peace process.

The United States is in a position to insist that the process of normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab states must not await the conclusion of Israeli-Palestinian peace. And it must also demonstrate that it is prepared to exert similar

pressure on Israel to exhibit its commitment to peace by ending all settlements activity. In March 2008 Israel's Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni was invited to speak in Doha, Qatar although Israel and Qatar do not have formal diplomatic relations. That symbolic gesture was most welcome in Israel precipitating a wave of positive commentary in the Israeli media about the real prospect of peace. The fact that Qatar was very critical of Israel's war on Hamas and temporarily severed its relations with Israel does not change the fact that these are the kind of gestures that are needed to create a momentum toward comprehensive peace. In the end, the Arab Peace Initiative, which is historic in its scope and implications, must not be allowed to languish and the Obama administration must make it central in the search of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace.

## **Conclusion**

Rarely has the Arab-Israeli conflict faced both the prospect of a major breakthrough and violent conflagration at the same time. Only an immediate and active role by the United States can tip the balance in favor of a peaceful process. The main difficulty that has hampered progress in the past is that neither the conflicting parties nor the United States has been able to deal with all of the elements involved to ensure sustained progress. The Obama administration must be prepared to engage simultaneously all players with the objective of moving them in concert toward the intended goal. It is an awesome task that requires determined effort as well as a clear vision and leadership. For many obvious reasons President Obama has a rare opportunity to change the narrative about the prospect of a lasting peace in the Middle East. His fresh, untainted outlook and his determination might allow him to achieve a breakthrough in a time and place where for too many years breakdowns have been the norm.

---

Alon Ben-Meir is a senior fellow at the Center for Global Affairs at NYU; he teaches courses on International Negotiations and Middle Eastern studies.  
[alon@alonben-meir.com](mailto:alon@alonben-meir.com) [www.alonben-meir.com](http://www.alonben-meir.com)