

**ANOTHER VIEWPOINT  
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**PEACE INITIATIVES IN THE MIDDLE EAST REVISITED. FORM  
DOMINATES SUBSTANCE**

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President Bush and Secretary Baker have once again embarked on a round of talks for peace in the Middle East. And once again their efforts seem to have come to naught. It is not the lack of interest, energy, resources, or effort that has crowned the initiative with little success. Nor is it the apparent unwillingness of the Arabs and Israelis to reach for peace. Both parties want peace--on their own terms. The United States also wants peace in the Middle East, but without "twisting arms" or "applying pressure." Given the conflicting terms and interests of the two warring parties, and the unwillingness of the United States to use its prestige and resources as a pressure mechanism, it is not surprising that the peace initiative has so far ended in a stalemate. However, much of the breakdown in the initiative can be avoided by minor policy adjustments. It is almost certain that had more attention been paid to the substance of the intended negotiations, some progress would have been achieved.

The shuttle diplomacy of Secretary Baker, and of others before him, has tended to concentrate on whether there will be a large peace conference or direct negotiations between the parties, whether the conference will meet periodically or only once to introduce the prospective negotiators to each other, and whether the UN will or will not be involved. There has been much concern with questions such as where to meet, when to meet, who shall meet whom, or who shall represent the Palestinians, etc. These questions may be important, but they have little to do with

the substance of the conflict. Yet the answer to each of the questions has become a determining factor whether there will be negotiations or not. As a result the negotiations have been chronically obstructed. The cost of such misplaced emphasis has been high in terms of resources wasted as well as failure to achieve the peace every one claims to be searching for.

In contrast, historical experience indicates that once emphasis is focused on substance a breakthrough becomes likely. De Gaulle did it in Algeria. Pierre Mendes-France did it in Indo-China. Sadat and Begin did it in the Egypt-Israel conflict. Even Khomeini quickly brought the war with Iraq to an end by concentrating on the impact of the cease-fire rather than on the way to reach it.

Emphasis on form rather than on substance of the negotiations by the Arabs and Israelis is not accidental. Each party thinks it can improve its position if the negotiations take one form rather than another. It may also be that the emphasis on form is used as a tactic to delay negotiations altogether in order to reap certain benefits in the meantime. To illustrate, the Arabs, especially the Palestinians, insist on an international peace conference presumably because they feel they can gain a sense of pride, dignity, and sympathy by putting their case on a large international platform. By this means they also can avoid sitting face to face with Israel which could imply formal recognition of Israel before a peace agreement has been reached. The Palestinians also hope to achieve recognition as an independent party in a peace conference.

The Israelis, on the other hand, most probably use the emphasis on form at the expense of substance as a delaying tactic. They want peace, but there is no rush to conclude a peace agreement as long as other benefits can be realized in the meantime. For example, while arguments continue regarding the form future negotiations would take, Israel continues to enlarge Jewish habitation in the Occupied Territories, displace Palestinians from their land, pressure many

of them to emigrate, and thus weaken their hold on the territories that are the main source of conflict.

It is unfortunate that neither the Arabs nor the Israelis are willing to take a more realistic look at the situation in order to promote peace negotiations. For example, what difference does it make if negotiations are carried out in an international conference (as the Arabs want), in a regional conference, or even in direct talks between the parties (as Israel wants)? Large international conferences have done little in the past to improve the positions of the Arabs. Their case has been heard again and again in large UN conferences, and it has done little to bring peace any closer. Resolutions of international conferences can do little to promote peace if they are not backed by instruments of enforcement or if the relevant parties are not willing to negotiate and comply.

Why do the Arab countries insist on wide participation by non-Middle Eastern countries in any prospective peace conference? Many countries that are desired and might be willing to attend have done little in the past, and can do little now to enhance the position of the Arabs. They might vote in favor and express support of Arab causes, but they have neither resources nor political or military clout and commitment to make a difference.

Similarly, it is puzzling that the Israelis would object to a peace conference. Such conferences have not hurt them in the past, in as much as their protector nations have always stood by them to protect their interests.

Why do the Israelis object to the auspices of the United Nations when their own state was created under those same auspices? Is it not possible that by involving the UN, Israel might induce that world body to revoke its resolution associating Zionism with racism? Why do the Israelis insist on advance approval of Palestinian delegates to any negotiations? They know that

unless those delegates are credible and have support and confidence of the PLO, they will not be able to deliver on their agreements. Is it possible that all these arguments and conditions regarding form are simply delaying tactics to give Israel time to control more land and reduce the Palestinian population in the Occupied Territories?

Finally, why does Israel insist on direct face to face negotiations with the Arab countries? Is it because Israel expects the Arabs to say no and thus bear the blame for failure of the peace initiative?

Neither Israel nor the Arabs are innocent or honest positive contributors to the peace initiative. Though the Palestinians have lost so much and can hardly make any more concessions on substance, it may be easy for them to make concessions on form. In fact, they would do better if they were to compromise on form and save their negotiating expertise to matters of substance, if and when Israel comes to the negotiating table.

Similarly, Israel may be gaining from the delaying tactics based on matters of form. Yet, these same tactics are obstructing the creation of peace and security for its people. They also are compounding enmity with the Arabs, costing the economy dearly, and possibly endangering Israel's relations with its greatest benefactor, the United States.

A more viable approach by both the Arabs and Israel may still be found, if indeed they wish to create peace between them. While the exact approach has to be specified by the negotiating parties, or their intermediaries, the following may be helpful steps toward putting back some life into the United States' peace initiative.

First, it is necessary to identify the parties to the Arab Israeli conflict. Not all Arab countries are concerned or relevant. However, it is important to focus on the confrontation

parties and the neighbors of Israel who will be directly affected by any settlement that may be concluded.

Second, it is important for each party to identify the issues of substance and the options that may be negotiated in consistency with the objectives of sovereignty, security, and peaceful coexistence. Whether these options are made public or not is not important, but they do set the limits beyond which a given party will not go.

Third, it is equally important to identify the issues of substance and options of the other party to the negotiations, and to make sure that some gratification is allowed for to induce that other party to the negotiation table.

Fourth, it is helpful to identify the forms or frameworks within which negotiations may be conducted productively. Once this is done, it will be helpful to select the framework with the least cost in terms of incentives to negotiate and in terms of resources to be utilized in keeping law and order. Furthermore, special benefits may accrue by taking short cuts to peace whenever that seems possible, such as a “surprise” visit by Arafat to Jerusalem or by Shamir to Amman or Damascus.

Finally, whichever framework is selected, it should be remembered that direct negotiations are indispensable and inevitable, and that the United Nations auspices have been the most viable and equally indispensable in dealing with the Arab Israeli conflict. That is the road that should be taken

In the final analysis, it is lasting peace that counts, not how it is attained.

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