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The Day After . . . in Jerusalem

A Strategic Planning Exercise
on the Path to Achieving Peace
in the Middle East

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Summary

Overview

In the fall of 2008, before the U.S. presidential election and unexpected Israeli invasion of Gaza, the RAND Center for Middle East Public Policy conducted a series of exercises that generated the conclusion that the new U.S. administration simply could not afford to delay engaging in serious Arab-Israeli peacemaking. This effort drew on the insights of nearly 50 leading experts and former government officials who participated in a strategic planning exercise that highlighted the full range of security challenges in the Middle East. A major goal of the exercise was to develop and refine alternative strategies that the new U.S. administration might pursue in addressing the Israeli-Palestinian problem and other regional issues. While it was recognized that the new administration would undoubtedly face other immediate and serious challenges in the region—notably Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan—this exercise-based study concluded that the decisive advancement of the Arab-Israeli conflict toward resolution should also be a top administration priority, in part because of its effect on all of these issues.

After the U.S. elections, the Obama administration did, in fact, place the Israeli-Palestinian issue high on its agenda, especially with the appointment of a special envoy, former Senator George Mitchell. This step was very much in line with the conclusions of our experts in the exercise. The administration's commitment to an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement was further emphasized in President Obama's efforts to reenergize negotiations at the time of the September 2009 UN General Assembly meeting.

Whether this elevation of the Arab-Israeli issue will continue to be a top priority of the administration remains to be seen, especially as difficulties occur; difficulties inevitable in any effort to deal with issues of such complexity and consequences (political and otherwise). But the basic insight of this project will remain valid: This issue needs to be near the top of the U.S. policy agenda, and it must remain there until serious progress toward a resolution of the conflict is achieved, if not a complete resolution of all outstanding issues.

It is well recognized that events subsequent to October 2008—the November U.S. election, the December Israeli invasion of Gaza, and the February 2009 Israeli elections—have altered some aspects of this critical area of international security policy and strategy. At the same time, it has become increasingly clear that a major focus and product of this exercise project remains highly germane: Although the situation on the ground in the region has changed since the exercises upon which the conclusions presented herein took place, this document, which outlines general approaches to seeking the resolution of the differences between Israel and Palestine and other neighbors in the region, presents viable strategic alternatives that could be considered by the National Security Council.

In considering the alternative strategies that emerged over the course of the testing for and conduct of the exercise, it is not surprising (nor was it anticipated) that, in the final

analysis, no single strategy alternative emerged that received unanimous support from the participants. However, there was a broad consensus that the strategy options that emerged did in fact accurately reflect the broad alternatives that should be considered by the new administration.

Strategic Options for Addressing Arab-Israeli Issues in the Broader Middle East Context¹

STRATEGY 1: Lay the Groundwork for Later Israeli-Palestinian Peace Negotiations

Make Iraq, Iran, and security in the Persian Gulf region initial top priorities. At the same time, begin working to create a security environment in Palestine conducive to improving economic conditions and enables civil society developments more favorable for a future Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. Tactical aspects of this strategy might include naming a high level envoy, who could act as an “honest broker” between the parties, and facilitating the improvement of security conditions in the West Bank and Gaza with the help of third parties.

STRATEGY 2: Aggressive Israeli-Palestinian Negotiation Effort

Aggressively seek an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement (and possibly also simultaneously seek resolution of the Israeli-Syrian conflict). The United States would play a proactive role—putting forward proposals and expending its influence to get acceptance by both sides—and would solicit funding from other countries to assist with economic development in Palestine. Although the 2003 “road map” agreed upon by the so-called Quartet (the United States, the European Union, the United Nations, and Russia) would be set aside, the Quartet would be engaged to support the new effort.

STRATEGY 3: Inclusive Comprehensive Regional Effort

Begin a comprehensive regional diplomatic effort addressing stability in Iraq, the threat posed by Iran, and an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. This would involve key players and allies, and would include dedicated resources for security guarantees, stabilization, and economic development. The United States would negotiate directly with Iran on a selected set of outstanding issues, including securing Iran’s agreement not to derail Israel/Palestine peace efforts.

STRATEGY 4: Phased Comprehensive Regional Effort—a Variant of Strategy 3

Recognize that a simultaneous and inclusive regional effort could overload the system. Thus, embrace a carefully staged, phased approach that lays out a framework and vision that connects all the major issues, creates mechanisms for key multiple tracks, and lets all the major actors know that they have a seat at the negotiating table. Begin with an effort to foster significant progress toward an Israeli-Palestinian agreement as the flagship

¹ More detailed descriptions and a set of pros and cons for the first three of the strategies is provided in the body of the report. Since Strategy 4 emerged in the course of the exercise, no effort to develop further details was undertaken.

undertaking, but also launch efforts on all other issues. For example, engage Iran slowly, looking to successes in other areas to undermine the Iranian narrative.

A Bottom Line Perspective

Two dominant sentiments emerged from the deliberations of this highly diverse group of experts and former government officials based on the scenario challenges in the exercise (described in the body of this document) and on the alternative strategies for the region:

1. the extraordinary importance of the Arab-Israeli conflict
2. the conclusion that the new administration cannot put Arab-Israeli peacemaking on the back burner.

As noted above, RAND proffers the results of this effort as further evidence in support of the importance of seeking resolution of the problems in this region.

As described in more detail in the body of the report, the May 14, 2009, roundtable discussion unequivocally reaffirmed the broad consensus from the fall 2008 exercises that the Arab-Israeli conflict should be a top national security priority and that substantial progress remains possible.