

The Unique Role of Moderate Arab States

Although key Arab states such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia have an important role to play in any solution to the current Arab-Israeli conflict, all parties understand that the United States, the European Union (EU), and the United Nations (UN) must ultimately lead mediation. Israeli participation in any solution demands it. For this reason, moderate Arab regimes caught in the crossfire of the conflict, such as Egypt, have issued pleas to the international community and to the United States in particular, asking them to use their influence to diffuse tensions between the belligerent parties. Such efforts must address both the security and the political issues that lie at the root of the conflict and must produce a final deal that fairly accommodates the aspirations of both Palestinians and Israelis. To this end, provided Egypt has the support of regional governments and the international community, it is ready to take whatever steps are required to end hostilities and to advance a just and final peace agreement that might end this historical conflict once and for all.

Thus far, Egypt has experienced partial success in its role as mediator in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict by defusing several crises, preventing certain incidents from becoming armed struggles, and bringing the two parties and President Bill Clinton to the negotiating table in Taba in January 2001. Husni Mubarak's frequent visits to Europe and the United States, his meetings in Cairo with U.S. and other delegations, and his constant communication with key Arab leaders testify to Egypt's commitment to its role as regional moderator in the Middle East.

Egypt relies on a network of relations with all interested parties and believes it can work hand in hand with the United States if the latter as-

Ahmed Abdel Halim is a member of the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs. He is the former deputy director of the National Centre for Middle East Studies in Egypt and a retired army general.

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sumes the role of mediator. Egypt has unrestricted relations with the Arab countries, diplomatic relations with Israel, healthy international relations with EU states and the UN, and a distinguished relationship with the United States. In short, Egypt is an active and efficient member of the Middle East with good relations with most countries all over the world. By utilizing this network, Cairo might be able to bring the two sides together and help them overcome the obstacles that may arise on the path toward a settlement.

Recently, the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs held a meeting in Cairo with the steering committee of the International Crisis Group, a newly formed international group examining and trying to find solutions to chronic problems that may disturb world peace, to promote a new plan that could be presented to the Israelis and the Palestinians.¹ Egypt proposes to shorten the current peace process by presenting a package deal that concerned international and regional parties could utilize, bypassing step-by-step solutions and interim agreements, to achieve the final objective of peace and end the conflict conclusively. Once the region has reached this objective, it will be ready for the fruitful phase of cooperation, development, and advancement.

Understanding Mediation's Limits

Any discussion of mediation, of course, risks attaching too much importance to the role of mediator because the achievement of a lasting peace in the Middle East is ultimately up to the parties directly involved. Nevertheless, examining the strengths and limitations of a mediator's role is useful to ensure that no avenue to achieve peace in the region is left unexplored.

Palestinians have long recognized the potential of outside mediators to secure positive outcomes in the region—the way Clinton began to achieve a peace settlement but did not have time to bring it to its conclusion. Palestinians made the initiation and use of mediation a primary goal of their agenda. Until recently, however, the Israeli government spurned the idea, and the Bush administration ignored it. The United States and the EU are now seriously considering the form that a mediator's role might take. Egypt, along with other leading Arab states, has expressed its support for third-party intervention, which Egyptian president Mubarak ranked among the key objectives of his latest missions to the United States and Europe.

One can interpret the concept of mediation in various ways, and mediation can operate at various levels. Of crucial importance, all interested parties of the Arab-Israeli conflict must accept a mediator. The mediator should be neutral, honest, and able to develop new ideas to overcome any

obstacles that might arise during its role as mediator. A mediator should aim to bring the parties together, facilitate their interaction, and help them to reach a final settlement. This role could be performed at two parallel levels—at the international level with the United States assuming the leading role and at the regional level with Egypt playing a major role. Coordination between the two levels is crucial to achieving a positive final solution.

For mediation to be effective, all interested parties must reach an acceptable definition of the mediator's role before any progress can be made in solving the conflict. The various potential mediators cannot define the role themselves and thrust it upon the parties. The gravity of the current situation necessitates that the mediator have the full backing of the international community and apply itself wholeheartedly to handling the crucial political dimension of the conflict. Accordingly, no country, including Egypt, can act alone; but each requires the support of the United States, the UN, the EU, key regional states, and the international community as a whole.

With the necessary backing, Egypt as a mediator could voice the opinions of these states and international bodies to the concerned parties and help the Palestinians and Israelis reach their common goals. Egypt can draw on its unique position in the Middle East as the only country with relations with both Arab states and Israel to unite the parties in a just and comprehensive peace agreement. It can also help lay the groundwork for future cooperation in all aspects of political and social life. The steady erosion in mutual trust among the parties, however, has thus far hindered any such effort. Unless Egypt gains the confidence of each side and the appropriate backing, the peace process has little hope of advancing.

Some hard-liners further complicate the prospective role of a mediator by seeking to exploit opportunities to open a new front on the Israeli-Lebanese border. As a result, they hinder any efforts by the parties to resume negotiations with Syria as part of a broader peace process in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Consequently, the role of the mediator must clearly be finely tuned to the aims and objectives of both Israelis and Arabs and must also adapt to changing circumstances and evolve as the peace process advances. The mediator must provide protection for both sides, prevent political stagnation, and alleviate the pressure hindering progress in negotiations. Partiality must be avoided at all costs; the mediator must have the ability to detect and monitor psychological and political changes in all parties and exploit such developments for the advancement of peace.

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The mediator must have a clearly defined mission, limited to realistically achievable goals; shortfalls in either the clarity or support of the mediator's position gives leverage to those advocating continued occupation of Palestinian territories and those who favor a prolonged war of attrition. Any failure to respond to the parties' changing sentiments or even the slightest hint of weakness in the support of the international community would adversely affect the efficacy of the mediator.

Recent Developments and Escalation

The collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which spanned from 1993 with the signing of the Oslo accord to late 2000, can be attributed to the divergent views of the two parties on both the goals and accomplishments of the agreement. In their "Declaration of Principles," the two camps established the framework within which they would move toward a final settlement but deferred more difficult issues until after a degree of trust was developed. A five-year timetable was set to resolve outstanding issues and to reach a permanent agreement.

In 1994 the two sides met in Cairo and signed the Cairo accord, setting into motion the five-year countdown toward the permanent peace stipulated in the 1993 agreement. Under the terms of the 1994 agreement, most of Gaza, as well as the town of Jericho, were transferred to the newly formed Palestinian Authority. The subsequent interim agreement, or Oslo II, signed in September 1995 elaborated on the transfer of territorial jurisdiction, stipulating that 27 percent of the West Bank be under some form of Palestinian control. The subsequent actions of both Israel and the Palestinians, however, increased tension. For Israel the process appeared to entail Israeli territorial concessions without tangible Palestinian concessions in return, while Palestinians perceived the process as robbing them of any leverage over an Israel that retained ultimate power to determine their destiny. Both sides concluded that the Oslo agreement required too many sacrifices for too little return.

The Camp David summit in July 2000 marked the most dramatic moment of the final-status negotiations that began the previous year, but ultimately the summit failed. In December 2000, the U.S. president presented parameters, which the two sides accepted with reservations, aimed at providing the basis for the subsequent talks that took place with Egyptian assistance in January 2001 in Taba. In the aftermath of the Taba meeting, the two opposing delegations stated that they had never been closer to reaching an agreement and that the remaining gaps could be bridged later. Relations between the two camps had become considerably strained, however, after the visit of

then-Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon to Haram al-Sherif in September 2000, marking the beginning of the latest incarnation of the Palestinian Intifada, which was a direct and spontaneous reaction to Sharon's intrusion into the holy Muslim places in Jerusalem.

Having progressed some way along the path to peace, the confrontation between Israel and the Palestinians reached its peak during the Arab summit of March 2002, when Sharon initiated military operations against the Palestinians in the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza. The Israeli military tightened its grip on Palestinian areas, placed Arafat under virtual house arrest, and conducted a series of operations in Palestinian-controlled towns and refugee camps. During this time, the conflict grew from a relatively static confrontation, limited to certain fixed points, into a more mobile and deadly military campaign in which both sides made use of all available resources against one another.

Potential mediators cannot define their role themselves and thrust it upon the parties.

The collapse of the Camp David summit and subsequent peace efforts, as well as the ensuing 18 months of violence, naturally accelerated political developments on both sides. The Palestinians' faith in a negotiated solution rapidly disintegrated and was replaced by a conviction that they should not lay down their arms until Israel agreed to end its occupation and withdraw from the land occupied since 1967. Israel, for its part, doubts Palestinians will ever agree to disarm and wavers between a harsh military response and the need for a peace agreement to end the historical conflict.

The Need for a Mediator

The need for external mediators is increasingly apparent. Western powers, in particular the United States, have been inconsistently engaged while the Palestinian Authority is virtually collapsing and Israeli assaults on Palestinian security agents continue. The possibility of rebuilding confidence in the negotiations or of Palestinian cooperation with Israel becomes ever more remote. Without intervention from a third party, prospects are dim for the two parties to resume negotiations.

Due to its influence, the most obvious mediator is, of course, the United States. The United States must take the matter seriously, for although the Mitchell report directly addresses the Palestinian crisis, the Bush administration has not yet demonstrated the political will necessary to implement this report. Vacillations between disengagement and reengagement charac-

terize its position. CIA director George Tenet's report, released after the Mitchell report, advocates a cease-fire plan as the first step toward the implementation of the Mitchell report; it also endorses the creation of a Palestinian state and a UN Security Council resolution to that effect.² Yet, U.S. commitment remains questionable and, until it is guaranteed, the United States does not offer much hope as a mediator. Moreover, by the time the United States does put its weight behind a peace initiative, the impact will have considerably softened.

**The step-by-step
'security first'
approach is no
longer relevant.**

George W. Bush's most recent speech, on June 25, 2002, contained a visionary element. Palestinians can see promise in Bush's repeated reference to U.S. support for the creation of a Palestinian state. Bush said that the Israeli occupation "that began in 1967" would end and that Israeli "settlement activity in the occupied territories [would] stop." He also called on Israel to withdraw its forces to the pre-Intifada positions they held on September 28, 2000, and to release the funds it owed to the Palestinian Authority, with other issues to be decided in the negotiations for a permanent settlement. The president conditioned all of these clauses, however, on the termination of Palestinian terrorist activities and the cessation of violence, a change in Palestinian leadership, a total reform of the Palestinian Authority, and a structural change in the Palestinian way of life. He called for such changes with a view toward building a practicing democracy with new political and economic institutions, instituting market economics, and establishing a new constitution and new Palestinian parliament. Bush's vision, however, lacked a detailed and thorough plan of implementation. In addition to other problems, it failed to suggest a mechanism to implement the plan in achievable terms. The international and regional communities look forward to receiving a plan to turn this visualization into a concrete reality, as well as to more mediation efforts on the part of the United States and the rest of the concerned parties.

Another well-qualified candidate for the role of mediator is the EU, either alone or within a quartet (an informal group consisting of the EU, United States, UN, and Russia). Indeed, the emergence of the quartet as a political force represents a significant development insofar as it sets a precedent for concerted action on the part of major international players. The EU, long held at arm's length by the United States, is now frequently consulted by the U.S. administration, and the two work hand in hand on many fronts. Eager to maintain this newfound role, the EU strives to accommodate U.S. interests, even though it is often uneasy with the U.S. line on the

Middle East. As such, the EU has initiated a series of independent, high-level official visits to the region to coax Palestinians, Israelis, and Americans to the negotiating table without confrontation or pressure.

The Arab world, in particular Egypt and Jordan, has also sought to advance the peace effort. In April these two countries took the unusual step of presenting their own initiative to end violence and resume the political process that was interrupted after Taba. More recently, the Arab League unanimously endorsed the Saudi initiative offering normal relations between Arabs and Israelis in exchange for a withdrawal from the land occupied since 1967. It also endorsed the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital and a just solution to the refugee problem, to be agreed on by all parties in accord with UN resolutions. To this end, the Arab states sought the backing of the United States.

Any mediator's efforts must incorporate the lessons of history by understanding the shortcomings of past peace efforts and the mindsets of the principal players today. The first lesson to learn is that the step-by-step "security first" approach inherent in U.S. peace envoy Anthony Zinni's mission and Tenet's plan no longer has the capacity to bring about a lasting cease-fire on its own, because the conflict has entered a new stage and the players have changed. Second, the Oslo agreement and its aftermath suggest that the two sides are unlikely to accept an offer of another interim agreement because decisions that once would have profoundly affected the political dynamics of the region have now lost their luster. Third, a far more vigorous initiative is now required, combining strong security measures with a clear political articulation of the form the final settlement should take. Neither the present vision of the international community for the future shape of the region nor the promise of resumed negotiations are sufficient; the objective now must be to seize this moment of crisis and turmoil and secure a final agreement immediately.

In view of its influence and special relationship with Israel, the United States naturally must play a leading role in the Middle East problem, with assistance from other international and regional players including Egypt. Third parties must be aware of the problems that arose when international mediators intervened in negotiations in the past and must sensitively address the fears both parties feel at the prospect of allowing any outsider to play a role in its destiny. Taking lessons from Oslo, one cannot ignore the need for a third-party mediator to ensure steady progress in negotiations and prevent sticking points from leading to a total breakdown in relations.

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The introduction of a new plan for mediation amid an ongoing conflict is an inherently political act requiring acute sensitivity to the underlying political context of the situation. This truism certainly applies in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian situation, particularly in light of the divergent attitudes toward the very notion of international involvement and the asymmetrical nature of the current conflict: one side relies on conventional military operations while the other resorts to a variety of unconventional and unpredictable tactics.

Two points of view dominate the current political scene concerning mediation. Aware of the tremendous power imbalance, Palestinians have requested greater involvement on the part of the international and regional community. For precisely the same reason, Israel has repeatedly resisted outside intervention, claiming that only the parties directly involved can achieve peace. Recent developments, however, have led to a shift in the Israeli consensus, and the current sense of despair now prompts most Israelis to welcome outside intervention. Moreover, the multitude of precedents for a third-party role in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, such as the 1994 meeting in Cairo with the resulting Cairo accord, the 1995 Oslo II interim agreement, the Camp David summit in 2000, Clinton's parameters in 2000, and the Taba meeting in 2001, forms a backdrop for current discussions regarding regional and international mediation.

Merging Theory and Practice

The speed with which the situation on the ground in the Middle East has deteriorated makes it difficult to prescribe a fixed solution. Indeed, considering the unpredictability of developments, what appeared viable yesterday is unlikely to hold water tomorrow. Much of the discussion surrounding a possible third-party mediator also presupposes the existence of a functioning Palestinian Authority. The absence of the authority—a likelihood at this point—would require a complete reexamination of the idea.

The introduction of a third-party mediator, to be effective, cannot take place in a political vacuum. Therefore, the only viable egress from the current impasse requires the international community to provide a clear description of what form a just, comprehensive, and final settlement will take. The primary role of the mediator in this context must then be to enhance confidence between Israel and the Palestinians, to act as a vehicle for international involvement in peace negotiations, and to ensure steady progress toward a final settlement. Over time, the role of mediator must evolve to respond to developments in the political and security situation.

In light of recent developments, an initiative establishing a new mediating role must first amount to more than its predecessors. It must mark a departure from previous U.S. policy by firmly committing to a final political settlement rather than to a process that might produce one. Such a plan should be presented to the international community and a broad coalition consisting of the United States supported by the EU, the UN, and key Arab states including Egypt. These criteria for a negotiating plan would shake the paralyzing distrust between Israel and the Palestinians and also provide the sort of pressure that would carry the plan beyond the initial stages.

Second, a lasting cease-fire must be achieved. Any form of commitment to this goal is worthwhile and efforts to achieve it should not be allowed to waver.

Third, both sides must accept the mediation of a third party. Here, Egypt must play a major role alongside the United States, both in the current Israeli-Palestinian dispute and in the wider context of historical Middle East conflicts, particularly with regard to Syria and Lebanon. Egypt is thus obliged to utilize its network of relationships with all interested parties in the region and worldwide and its unique position in the Middle East.

These stipulations indicate that the mandate, role, and function of any prospective mediator cannot be fully and precisely defined in advance; it must evolve as circumstances change and as the settlement moves forward. Nevertheless, mediation is an important element in the equation and deserves more attention than it has been awarded in the past. The hardening of positions on both sides and the toll of 18 months of escalating violence, however, severely diminish the prospect for success of any mediation at this point in time despite its necessity.

Without a sustained and concerted political effort on the part of the international community, with the United States and other mediators playing their roles, further escalation of violence and the spread of terror beyond the immediately affected region is a certainty. This reality alone should bring the parties to their senses and force them to work together with the help of a third party to reach a common goal of lasting peace and stability in the region.

The mediator must not play a static role serving merely as a go-between for the two sides but rather must represent a flexible and mobile body pursuing close relations with all protagonists. Indeed, in view of the current political situation, the mediator must reach out broadly to a host of constituencies

Bush's vision lacked a detailed and thorough plan of implementation.

on both sides including political officials, military leaders, nongovernmental organizations, and others. The mediator must know in advance about political Israeli-Palestinian flash points and must help ensure that both parties respect the new rules of the game. The intensity of recent political events, together with the level of mistrust and anger, suggests that the mediator must intercede far more than originally envisioned.

One of the mediator's key functions will be to explain its strengths and limitations in clear terms to avoid heightened expectations and undue optimism. A broad constituency, including the media, whose ability to communicate and influence the general public is immense, must hear and understand such an explanation. Good relations with the media, backed by a steady flow of information and explanation between the mediator and media, is crucial to projecting an image of the mediator's neutrality, rationality, and efficacy.

The Final Way Forward

Much recent debate has focused on whether the international community in general, and the United States in particular, is sufficiently committed to solving the Israeli-Palestinian dispute and the problems of the Middle East. The real issue is not, however, the degree of intensity of foreign engagement but rather its purpose and direction. Unfortunately, concentrating on step-by-step political actions and interim agreements—the course followed in the past—is no longer relevant for the immediate political reality. An active and efficient mediator must now bring all parties to the negotiating table. A general reorientation must take place, whereby the international community spearheaded by the United States and backed by regional mediators—Egypt, chief among them—throws its full weight behind a realistic and permanent settlement and provides the necessary political momentum to see a peace process carried through to a conclusion.

The most significant step toward ending the current deadlock would be for the United States to forge an international coalition of like-minded European and Arab mediators who could formulate a comprehensive and final settlement. Evidence that both Israel and the Palestinians would like to find a way out of the current stalemate and that the leaderships of both camps are currently incapable of reaching an agreement alone is considerable.

One of the first steps the international community should take, complementary to but ultimately independent of the role of mediator, is to help rebuild the Palestinian Authority's core competencies. Restoration is crucial for the Palestinian leadership to meet humanitarian needs and to fill the vacuum into which radical groups have inserted themselves.

The parties must be encouraged to accept mediators in the initial stages of disputes and to use mediators as a forum for exchanging views. The UN Security Council should commend the mediator, at least after the fact.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has long ceased to be a local one. The international community therefore faces a highly complex political challenge in the Middle East. Time will not take care of this problem; it is not too soon to take energetic action. For stabilizing the Middle East, mediation is the key word, and Egypt is ready to play its role in this endeavor.

Notes

1. "A Time to Lead: The International Community and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Middle East Report*, no. 1 (April 10, 2002).
2. UN Security Council Resolution 1397, March 12, 2002.

