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Security First: U.S. Priorities in Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking

Featuring J. D. Crouch II, Montgomery C. Meigs, and Walter B. Slocombe
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On December 10, 2008, Walter B. Slocombe, J. D. Crouch II, and Gen. Montgomery C. Meigs (Ret.) addressed a Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute to launch a new strategic report entitled Security First: U.S. Priorities in Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking. Mr. Slocombe, currently an attorney at Caplin & Drysdale, served as undersecretary of defense in the Clinton administration and worked in the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq. Mr. Crouch, former deputy national security advisor and assistant secretary of defense, is currently a senior scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy. General Meigs served in the U.S. army for thirty-five years, including two tours in Bosnia commanding NATO forces; he is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Walter B. Slocombe

Security is the fundamental obstacle to a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Negotiations are not able to resolve the security issue, yet security is essential to meaningful negotiations. That is why more progress must occur on security before any attempt is made to conclude an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. For Israel, security is the payoff from any settlement; for Palestinians, the payoff is statehood. Unless Israelis are convinced that a Palestinian state can provide real security for Israel, and unless the Palestinians are convinced that Israel will let the state function, there can be no comprehensive agreement.

Since 2001, the security situation has worsened in a number of ways. Hamas, which controls Gaza and has a substantial presence in the West Bank, is not reconciled with the idea of a peace agreement. The use of short-range rockets by Hamas and other groups in the Gaza Strip has made the security fence around Gaza -- useful when suicide bombers were the primary threat -- relatively ineffective. The cooperative relationship between Israeli and Palestinian security forces enshrined in the Oslo agreements has seriously eroded over the past eight years, and some items that were agreed on in 2000 -- such as the demilitarization of a Palestinian state -- have since become points of contention. In addition, the emergence of the Iranian threat has altered the security considerations for everyone in the region.

The problem of security is partly one of will, partly one of capability. An acceptable Palestinian state would have both the determination and the means to ensure security within its own borders and to prevent rocket attacks against Israel. For its part, Israel needs to allow the Palestinians to develop that capability; they need not only equipment, but also the authority. Capability is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to foster a peace agreement; a Palestinian state would also need the will to make use of its capability.

J. D. Crouch

To achieve security so negotiations can move forward, a third party could be brought in to keep the peace, such as an international force led by NATO, the UN, or Jordan. The obstacles to such an arrangement, however, are considerable, and could undermine the process.

An international force could become a target for rejectionist groups, such as Hamas or al-Qaeda affiliates, or a

propaganda tool for Iran. Also, the Palestinians might see the force as occupiers, not intermediaries. For their part, Israelis do not want to outsource security, since potentially either the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) or Israeli settlers could come into direct conflict with that force. Furthermore, given the current environment, the third party would effectively be a peace enforcer, not a peacekeeper. The force would have to conduct robust counterterrorism and intelligence operations, but it is unlikely that a NATO force would be available with the will and capability to sustain such a commitment. The force would require a broad mandate, since combating Hamas also involves providing social services, not just security. Finally, the force has the potential to retard the development of a Palestinian state, since Palestinians could become dependent on it or Palestinian officials could use it as an excuse for inaction.

After proper security measures are achieved and an agreement is in place, there may be a role for a small outside force. The notion, however, of injecting such a force to improve security in the current situation, or putting it on the ground with more-limited objectives and then having its mission creep up to peace enforcement, is likely to be ineffective and counterproductive. Consequently, a legitimate Palestinian security apparatus is needed, one that is able to control its own security situation as well as resist interference from Iran and Hamas.

Montgomery C. Meigs

The Dayton Mission, led by U.S. security coordinator Lt. Gen. Keith Dayton, is making progress on building Palestinian security capabilities by training young Palestinians who are not associated with the "old guard." So far, 1,100 Palestinians have been trained, with one battalion deployed in Hebron and another in Jenin. They are working with the IDF and the Palestinian Authority arresting thugs, drug dealers, and even some Hamas members and Islamic Jihad operatives. Despite firefights and casualties, they are maintaining unit cohesion. They must do more on counterterrorism, but that will come with time. The Dayton Mission is also running a professional development program with the Ministry of Interior. According to officials in Jordan, Israel, and the West Bank, the Dayton Mission is the only aspect of the peace process that is working effectively.

Despite its success and the fact that the mission is the "pointy end of the spear" of a serious policy priority, the effort is seriously undermanned and underfunded. As such, we recommend the following changes:

- Since the Defense Department has access to more funds, and the State Department has procedural rules that are alien to the kind of military mobility and rules of engagement that are necessary for this kind of operation, the Dayton Mission should be brought under the Defense Department. The full weight of both, however, should reinforce its successes. Lockstep cooperation between the U.S. consul general in Jerusalem and the military is also necessary.
- The mission should be expanded to include more Americans, special-forces officers, and linguists.
- Initiatives aiming to train the Ministry of Interior and other backup institutions such as the judiciary should be brought into the mission. International bodies currently responsible for overseeing these reforms could provide logistical support and oversight for units that have completed training.
- The Dayton Mission should have independent intelligence capacity tied to national capabilities.
- The mission should have senior coordinators assigned to it, both at the U.S. National Security Council level, and in conjunction with the IDF.

A Palestinian state with competent security capabilities will be essential in the long term. Fundamentally, this is what makes a state a state in the sense that it is able to contain threats to its own existence -- whether they are threats from its own territory, threats from outside, or threats to other people's territory from inside its borders.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Washington Institute research assistants.

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