Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum

Isolation vs. Engagement

Part 2: When Diplomats Do Their Job

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Description and Major Policy Points

Israel has unveiled its newest brand of diplomacy, having begun negotiations with Syria, reached a ceasefire with Hamas, and called for dialogue with Lebanon. Part two in a series of fora on *Isolation vs. Engagement*, the July 8th Forum contrasted current US and Israeli diplomatic efforts in the Middle East, as well as the mediating roles of the United States, Egypt and Turkey. What are the most effective diplomatic tools for brokering peace, and what strategies should be adopted by the next US Administration? The following are the major policy points that emerged from the Forum:

- Isolation and engagement are not necessarily mutually exclusive foreign policy tools; they can and should be used in tandem to maximize political leverage.

- Isolation as a policy is ineffective when the target regime enjoys widespread popular support, as with Hamas in Gaza. In such instances, even hawkish engagement will be more productive.

- US foreign policy and mediation in the Middle East suffers from a dearth of creativity. The United States should learn from the successes of other mediators, such as Turkey.

- Conflicts throughout the Middle East are highly interconnected. The various sets of negotiations must be conducted simultaneously, not one at a time. Iran and Syria are particularly intertwined, both in their alliances and in the problems they are causing for the United States. For these reasons, the United States should approach in tandem its negotiations with the two countries.

- While other mediators can do a great deal to advance a given negotiation, only US approval can confer international legitimacy on any agreement that is reached.

- The Bush administration should refrain from pushing for an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement before the President leaves office. Any such agreement would be untenable, and put additional stress on the Israeli-Palestinian relationship. Forcing change is dangerous, counterproductive at best, and massively destabilizing at worst.

- If the Bush administration truly wishes to leave a positive legacy in the Middle East, they should open constructive dialogue with Iran, so that the path is cleared for the next US administration to begin serious negotiations.

- Sanctions work best on a vulnerable target; as the power dynamics between two players begin to converge, engagement becomes the more effective policy. Iran's power is growing, as is its influence throughout the Middle East, and the United States must adjust its Iranian policy accordingly.

- Afghanistan and Pakistan will be the most serious threats to US security in the tenure of the coming US Administration; the US must resolve its issues with Iran and Syria in order to be able to focus on these greater dangers.

- President Bush tends to frame engagement in the negative terms of "appeasement," and has fairly well convinced the American public that it undermines our position of strength in the world arena. The US citizenry must be made to understand that, on the contrary, engagement strengthens our position by enabling the United States and our opponents to resolve the very issues that make all of us less secure.

Summary of the Forum

Opening remarks started by recognizing the value of both track-one and track-two diplomacy, while at the same time noting that the Forum's focus on mediation and other official diplomatic methods would emphasize the former. The purpose of this Forum was to talk about the possibilities present in the Middle East diplomatic process, and to explore the developments that could conceivably take place therein. In the debate on isolation vs. engagement, Search For Common Ground assumes that talking is always the better option. To emphasize the need for dialogue with one's enemies, Former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was quoted as pointing out that, "You don't make peace with friends."

Five options were outlined regarding the basic choices facing parties involved in conflict:

1. Whether to pursue a policy of isolation (a.k.a. relative passivity) or one of engagement;
2. Whether or not to engage in dialogue with the enemy;
3. Whether or not to set preconditions for such talks;
4. Whether or not to impose sanctions;
5. If a policy of engagement is to be pursued, whether to engage in unilateral or multilateral negotiations.

At the end of the Bush administration, there is a lot of mediating going on in the Middle East, but the United States is strangely absent in these negotiations. US sanctions on Iran are still severe, even though Iran no longer fits the model of a state on which sanctions are most likely to be effective. Sanctions and isolation work best:

1. When they are imposed by a multinational coalition (vs. unilaterally);
2. When the target is vulnerable (vs. influential); and
3. When the goals of the sanctions are agreed upon (vs. disagreements or miscommunications about political goals).

US policy toward Iran is in flux because the parameters of the situation are changing, and the country is gaining influence. Iran has become too important and influential to ignore.

Isolation and engagement are not necessarily mutually exclusive tools; they can be used in tandem. For instance, Israel is currently engaging Hamas via intermediaries, while still trying to keep them diplomatically isolated. Isolation can be used as leverage up to a point, but then negotiations have to start. Hawkish engagement can be an alternative to isolation: tactics such as cutting off bank accounts or refusing visas can still be hard on the target party, yet more effective than comprehensive sanctions. Constructive engagement, however, is the best option. A quote from Senator Joe Biden illustrates how the willingness to engage can catch our enemies off-guard, and give the United States the upper hand in a conflict: "The worst nightmare for a regime that thrives on isolation and tension is an America ready, willing and able to engage."

We must reposition diplomacy as something that will make the United States stronger. President Bush tends to frame engagement in the negative terms of "appeasement," and has fairly well convinced the American public that it undermines our position of strength in the world arena. The US citizenry must be made to understand that, on the contrary, engagement strengthens our position by enabling the US and our opponents to resolve the very issues that make all of us less secure.

Isolation is of limited utility as an exclusive policy, especially when the target party has a significant degree of popular support. If they've already won domestic legitimacy, then the argument that engagement would confer legitimacy upon them doesn't hold water. Interestingly, most of the rockets fired on Israel since the ceasefire have been launched by Fatah-affiliated groups, in an effort to spoil any possibility of Hamas succeeding at negotiations with Israel where Fatah has failed. Conversely, Hamas has been adopting former Fatah language, e.g. that violence against Israel is not in Palestinian

interest. Before the ceasefire, the rules of the game were understood; now, both sides are testing the new boundaries of their relationship, e.g. Israel going after Hamas charities in the West Bank, and Hamas still refusing to enter into serious negotiations. The ceasefire probably won't hold initially, but it may hold in its second or third incarnation.

More than in its dealings with Hamas, Israel's diplomatic genius is evident in how it has blunted some of Iran's political instruments by negotiating with Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas. This has won Israel diplomatic leverage by diminishing Iran's leverage with those parties. However, all these negotiations do not necessarily signify an absolute change in Israeli policy. It is possible that all these mediating processes have simply converged at the same time. Unfortunately, the government in Israel is teetering, with corruption charges against Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, leaving him with limited capacity to act. His cabinet doesn't give him the rope he needs to rehabilitate himself, and probably won't; this is unfortunate, since Olmert knows his time is limited and is inclined to commit his all to getting things done.

The Olmert administration has been a huge missed opportunity, and is likely to remain unredeemed. An election campaign could come in the next six months, and by June 30, 2009, a new Israeli PM will probably be in place. It may be Benjamin Netanyahu again, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, or Deputy Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz (the latter two of whom are competing for the head of Olmert's Kadima party). But even if hardliner Netanyahu wins, we should not preclude progress on diplomatic fronts, as he has been open to negotiating in the past.

However, it is difficult for any negotiation to make significant progress in the face of US neutrality. Other mediators can take the process only so far, at which point US collaboration is needed to give the negotiations legitimacy. The parties to a given conflict don't want to finalize anything unless it has the US stamp of approval—because of our world primacy, and because underneath it all, we are still trusted. More players in the diplomatic arena is good for world affairs, but "big ticket items" need US involvement. Oslo is a good example of when another country did an excellent job initiating a negotiation process which the United States then took over at a critical point. Unfortunately, the Bush administration's Middle East policy is based on how they would like to imagine the region, not on the realities on the ground. It is time for the United States to step up and guarantee the treaties that are being negotiated by other mediators; by not doing so, we are losing valuable diplomatic opportunities.

This is especially true in the case of Syria. The general US view that we don't need Syria is false; Syria gives us trouble in both Iraq and Iran, not to mention the human rights violations going on within Syria itself. The United States needs to confront these problems. Senators John Kerry and Chuck Hagel have already spoken out in favor of engaging Syria, and they must be encouraged to act on their convictions.

US-Syrian relations are terrible as of now, but perhaps only modest diplomatic creativity is needed to ameliorate the situation. US power has not diminished in the world, but other countries are also now taking the lead in conflict mediation, and we would do well to learn from their successes. Indeed, when third parties have been engaged in dialogue, US officials have not even displayed much intellectual curiosity as to what has been going on in those talks. If our policies prevent us from talking to a party directly, e.g. Iran, it would behoove us at least to know what they are saying to our allies. Turkey, on the other hand, has shown diplomatic creativity, and is perceived by both Israel and Syria as a helpful mediator. Of course, a crucial component of that particular case is that both sides wanted to engage in negotiations with each other: Syria hopes that peace with Israel will bring them peace with Washington, and they also want access to Israel's dynamic economy. Unfortunately, the Turkish government is on the verge of being ousted, which would make their mediation collapse—yet another urgent reason for the United States to get involved in the Syrian-Israeli talks as soon as possible.

The majority of Israelis are against a peace deal with Syria; they don't want to give the Golan Heights back because they are attached to the area in a way that the average Israeli was never attached to the West Bank or Gaza. The Golan is beautiful, and Israelis go there for recreation; it has been incorporated into the Israeli mental map. But because of these very motivations, Israeli public opinion could change under certain conditions, such as the promise of shared Syrian-Israeli park land, border-crossing without visas, and shared water rights. Changing Israeli public opinion is simply a question of leadership, and of securing the support of the US president for the Israeli-Syrian peace process.

It is an indication of how very momentous the Israeli-Syrian negotiations are that they have been generating a great deal of unease among the other major regional players—most notably Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah. Syria has been an important Iranian ally, so in order to keep Iran from acting as a spoiler in any Syrian talks, US diplomatic engagement with Iran must be simultaneous with Syrian engagement. The United States must move forward on all fronts at the same

time in order for any of them to succeed; the issues across the Middle East are so interconnected that all negotiations must progress together.

To truly effect change in the Middle East over next five years, the United States could employ its assets in the following ways:

1. End the war in Iraq;
2. Engage Syria;
3. Forge an Israeli-Palestinian agreement;
4. Help rebuild Lebanon;
5. Engage Iran;
6. Construct a multilateral anti-proliferation policy; and
7. Focus on issues of energy and the environment.

However, the Bush administration is unlikely to make progress towards many of these goals in its remaining seven months in office. Its recent efforts to rush Israel and the Palestinians into a permanent peace settlement are unlikely to bear any fruit, as the current conditions of the conflict make it unripe for resolution. Any policy of forcing change is dangerous, and forcing through an untenable and unpopular agreement between Israel and the Palestinians would be massively counterproductive to the goal of an ultimate peace. The best the Bush administration could do is ease the path for the next president. If Bush truly wishes to leave a positive legacy in the Middle East, he should officially open talks with Iran, which is amenable to such a development.

By June 30, 2009, the next administration will be ready to really take on big issues like the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Clearly, the new US president will face tremendous odds: the situation in Iraq is still very unstable and could get even worse, which would affect all of the peace processes in the Middle East; Afghanistan and Pakistan are shaping up to be the most serious threats to US security in the tenure of the coming administration; and the United States must resolve its issues with Iran and Syria in order to be able to focus on these greater dangers. Developing the relationship between the United States and the new Pakistani government will be crucial. Also, as Iran has the power and influence in Afghanistan to sway the conflict there in whichever direction it chooses, engaging positively with Iran could help the United States stabilize its position in Afghanistan.

In short, the next president must be committed to effecting change in the Middle East, preferably through a policy of constant, personal engagement tempered with a pragmatic perspective on the regional realities. The Middle East is in a dramatic transition period, and the opportunity to forge lasting change must be seized.

Search for Common Ground and the Consensus Building Institute initiated the U.S.-Muslim Engagement Project, which is producing a coherent strategy to better meet the long-term U.S. national security interests by addressing sources of tension between the United States and key Muslims countries. A bipartisan and diverse Leadership Group on U.S.-Muslim Engagement will jointly issue a set of recommendations to contribute to changes in U.S. policies and public opinion. Their report will be launched in September 2008.