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## How to break a Middle East stalemate

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Dan Meridor, one of Israel's four deputy prime ministers, said to me years ago that "the peace process is like riding a bicycle: When you stop pedaling, you fall off." And currently, the Israelis and Palestinians have stopped pedaling.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is convinced that this Israeli government cannot make a peace deal — or at least one he can live with — so he imposes conditions on negotiations. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sees these conditions as harsh and unprecedented, and doesn't want to pay a steep political price just to enter talks.

The Obama administration and the other members of the Quartet — the Middle East mediating group that also includes envoys from the European Union, Russia and the United Nations — want to resume direct talks and this past week held a preparatory meeting with Israeli and Palestinian negotiators in Amman, Jordan. There may be more such meetings, and that is good, because ultimately there will be no peace without negotiations.

But there should also be no illusions about the prospects of a breakthrough any time soon. The psychological gaps between the parties make it hard to resolve their differences and have bedeviled all the work for peace talks over the past few years.

I have been intimately involved in peacemaking efforts over the past 20 years under Presidents George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton and Obama, and I know that Abbas and Netanyahu carry the weight of their peoples' history and mythology, and face enormous political constraints. But those difficulties cannot be a reason to despair and accept a stalemate, particularly when those who reject peace will exploit any impasse to challenge the very idea of a two-state outcome.

While there may be no early breakthrough on holding negotiations, it is possible to overcome the stalemate. One way to do so — and to validate those Palestinian leaders, such as Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, who believe in nonviolence and coexistence — is for the Israelis to change the realities on the ground. After all, these Palestinian leaders need to be able to show that their approach is producing a process that will, in time, end the occupation.

What could demonstrate to the Palestinians that the occupation is receding? Examples are not hard to come by. Since the interim agreement of the Oslo process was finalized in 1995, the West Bank has been divided into non-contiguous areas known as A, B and C — with the Palestinians having putative control in Area A and Israel retaining overall responsibility in the two other areas. From the fall of 1995 to the spring of 2002, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) largely stayed out of Area A, which constitutes about 18 percent of the territory and includes all the major cities in the West Bank. According to the Oslo agreements, the Palestinians are to have civil and security responsibility in this area.

But in 2002, at the height of the second intifada and the horrendous suicide bombings that Palestinians were executing in Israel, the IDF began operating in Area A again to try to stop the attacks. Though the intifada ended in 2005 and Palestinian security forces have been generally effective in preventing terror attacks, the IDF still carries out periodic incursions into Palestinian cities to reinforce local security efforts. This grates on Palestinians, reminding them who remains in control.

So, one meaningful step would be either to stop all such incursions in Area A or, if there are continuing security concerns, to phase them out based on the security situation. Gabi Ashkenazi, former chief of staff of the IDF, has consistently said that “as the Palestinians do more on security, we will do less.” A gradual ending of incursions in Area A would certainly be consistent with that axiom.

In Area B, about 22 percent of the West Bank, Palestinian police maintain law and order but are not permitted to deal with terrorist threats. Israel could allow their presence to grow. From my discussions with Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak, I know that he is open to increasing the number of Palestinian police stations and broadening the areas where Palestinian security personnel operate. Now would be a good time to take these steps, as any such expansion would certainly be noticed, and welcomed, by the Palestinian public.

Finally, in Area C, which is about 60 percent of the West Bank, Palestinians' security and police forces have no access, their economic activity is extremely limited, and Israel retains civil and security responsibilities. There is no practical reason that the Palestinians cannot be permitted dramatically more economic access and activity in this area.

To give one example, there are Palestinian stone masonry factories in Area A, but Palestinians have limited access to the rock quarries in the West Bank, which are in Area C. In a case brought against Israeli ownership of the rock quarries, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled late last month that no additional quarries should be Israeli-owned. That ruling creates an opening for private Palestinian ownership, should any new quarries be established — and there clearly is room for more.

Expanding the Palestinians' economic opportunities in Area C would do wonders for job creation and the overall Palestinian economy. (In the West Bank, unemployment has come down in recent years but remains at about 16 percent.)

These steps should be feasible from an Israeli standpoint. First, these or similar changes could be implemented without altering the territory's political status and could be done in a way that would not put Israeli security at risk, particularly if coordinated closely with the IDF.

Second, Netanyahu has said repeatedly that he does not want to rule over Palestinians and that the stronger their economic base, the better the prospects for peace. These steps would certainly demonstrate that the prime minister means what he says. At the same time, they would signal to Palestinians that independence is possible and that the approach from Abbas and Fayyad — not Hamas resistance or violence — can produce it.

I'm not suggesting to forgo negotiations and their focus on a two-state solution. Talks need to be pursued, and the Obama administration is rightly doing so. The administration is also continuing to assist with institution-building by providing material support for the security, judicial and other sectors of Palestinian society — steps that fit neatly with the kind of actions I am proposing to validate leaders such as Fayyad. At this point, validation of nonviolence will come less from words and more from demonstrations that the occupation is shrinking and will, eventually, end.

The rest of the Middle East is churning, with dictators being toppled and protesters still in the streets a year into the Arab Awakening. Since the demand for free and fair elections has become a symbol of credibility in the uprisings, the pressure on both Fatah and Hamas to hold elections this year is likely to become irresistible. For the past few years, Abbas has said that he would not be a candidate in new elections, but now he is saying he would like those elections to take place in May and plans to depart the political scene afterward. Even if it will not be simple to reach an agreement with Hamas on the terms of elections, Abbas will feel the need to hold them sometime in 2012.

These elections are likely to shape the Palestinians' identity and whether they continue to accept nonviolence, peaceful coexistence with Israelis and a two-state solution. If there are clear signs that the occupation is diminishing, the positions of Palestinians such as Abbas, Fayyad and their followers who believe in nonviolence will be validated before the elections. This is essential because the alternative is Hamas, which rejects nonviolence and peace with Israel.

In the recent deal with the Israeli government to free kidnapped soldier Gilad Shalit, which gained the release of more than 1,000 prisoners, Hamas was seen as delivering political gain through an act of violence. By comparison, Abbas and Fayyad are not seen as delivering on the issues that matter to the Palestinian public, such as prisoner releases, Israeli withdrawal or a reduction of Israeli control.

For Palestinians, at least, this validation would also shrink the psychological gap between them and the Israelis, inspiring hope that negotiations could actually lead somewhere. It might, thus, also offer the best way to unstick the negotiating track. Even more important, with the changes sweeping the region and a political transition looming for the Palestinians, such a validation may be the only way to preserve support among the Palestinian and Arab publics for a two-state solution.

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