



Lara Friedman

Call for a New Paradigm

IN HIS SPEECH BEFORE THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL Assembly in late September, US President Barack Obama, referring to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, stated: “The question isn’t the goal we seek – the question is how to reach it. And I am convinced that there is no shortcut to the end of a conflict that has endured for decades.”

Coming almost exactly 18 years after the start of the peace process, these words appeared to announce the end, for now, of America’s role as the leader of efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They validated the suspicions of many that the Obama Administration, like the administrations before it, has come to believe that process can substitute, indefinitely, for peace.

This is a moment of clarity.

After things wind down at the UN, regardless of what happens in the Security Council and the General Assembly, the lives of Israelis and Palestinians will remain entwined. But make no mistake: the game has changed. The previous status quo – in which the Palestinians acquiesced to their role in a peace process bereft of content and credibility – is over.

This may be a good thing. A process that indefinitely postpones peace – while on the ground one party pursues policies that concretely obstruct the chances of ever achieving peace – isn’t good for anyone. Palestinians deserve dignity and self-determination as much as any other people. Likewise, Israelis deserve security and normalcy. And America’s interests aren’t served by the US continuing to compromise its own credibility by standing behind a peace process that no longer passes the laugh test.

But for it to actually be good news, the “process-over-peace” paradigm must be replaced by a new paradigm, whose clear focus is the end goal of a peace agreement, not the modalities of getting there.

For the United States, the guiding principle under this new paradigm must be: Do no harm. This means, for a start, preserving assistance to the Palestinians. Cutting assistance will mean the end of security cooperation that, more than anything else, benefits Israel. And cutting other assistance could mean the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, leaving Israel once again responsible for the daily lives of the Palestinians. Cutting assistance would clearly do harm, mainly to Israel.

But aid is not the whole story. In the absence of a political horizon, Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation will be revealed as little more than an agreement for the Palestinians to serve as subcontractors of the IDF. Likewise, absent a political horizon, it will soon be difficult for the PA to justify its existence as anything but a subcontractor to Israel’s military occupation, both managing civilian affairs and protecting Israeli settlers.

A new political horizon is urgently needed. If Obama can offer one, in the context of a new peace paradigm that rectifies the power

imbalance between Israelis and Palestinians, let him do just that. If he can’t or won’t, he should give his blessing to others who want to take the lead.

This is not as revolutionary or unprecedented as it may sound. The

Oslo Accords were not a US initiative – the US was brought in at the eleventh hour to shepherd the mostly completed effort to its finale. Such a US role may again be appropriate today.

The Europeans, in particular, seem ready and willing right now to do some heavy lifting. In his own UN speech, French President Nicolas Sarkozy offered strong words about peace as a goal in the near term, and for weeks, countries of the European Union played an energetic role in an attempt to stave off a



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confrontation on this issue at the UN.

Still, US leadership will be indispensable to finally end this conflict. It will thus be critical to keep up the pressure on Obama to hold firm to longstanding US principles regarding settlements, Jerusalem, and borders, and to rethink his retreat from peace-making. Obama must not forget that, in truth, pro-Israel must mean pro-peace, and pro-peace means not just talking approvingly about peace, but working to achieve it.

Today we need a peace paradigm that rejects tired excuses like “the sides have to work it out” or “we can’t want it more than the parties” and “Israelis and Palestinians have to understand each other.” Given the imbalance of power, together with a host of other reasons, the sides can’t work it out on their own. Much of the world can, and probably does, want peace more than some people on both sides of this conflict. And only when there is a political agreement that corrects the power imbalance and permits each side to get past its existential angst can knowing and understanding each other begin.

Obama’s speech at the UN brought to mind a famous quip: “Those who say it can’t be done should not interrupt those who are doing it.” There is no return to the process-over-peace paradigm, and recognizing this, the Obama Administration today can either step up or it can step aside, at least in the short-term. In the longer term, all of us who believe peace is possible and necessary for the interests of everyone involved – including the US – must spare no effort in convincing Obama that yes, it can be done, and yes, in the end it must be the US doing it. ●

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