



Published on *The American Task Force on Palestine* (<http://www.americantaskforce.org>)

[Home](#) > [Printer-friendly PDF](#) > [Printer-friendly PDF](#)

Is peace a ?vital? American interest?

Hussein Ibish

NOW Lebanon (Opinion)

September 4, 2012 - 12:00am

<http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=433041> [1]

September 4, 2012

Article Author(s): Hussein Ibish

Media Outlet: NOW Lebanon

Article Type: Opinion

Date: September 4, 2012

Source Link(s): <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=433041> [1]

“Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a vital national security interest,” the voice of the American foreign policy consensus has intoned, with its trademark gravitas, for the past decade. “But,” it continues sagely, “We cannot want peace more than the parties themselves.” Around Washington wise heads have nodded grimly at the self-evidence of this hegemonic dictum.

Few have stopped to notice that this formulation is internally inconsistent to the point of being an oxymoron. Either resolving the conflict is a vital interest or it isn't.

If it is vital, then obviously the United States not only can, but must, want it more than other parties. What's vital, after all, can't be subject to the whims of others' perceptions.

If, on the other hand, this interest is subject to the needs, desires, political contingencies and caprices of other powers, how vital can it be? Handing “the parties” a veto of noncooperation is hardly consistent with genuinely deeming an interest to be “vital.”

There is, of course, a deeper complication. The primary reason for the caveat that undermines the assertion that peace is vital to the United States is actually that any American administration, because of the domestic political balance of power, is profoundly limited in the timing and nature of the pressure it can put on Israel.

The Obama administration began by gambling heavily on securing a settlement freeze, but proved unwilling or unable to apply the necessary pressure to secure and maintain a genuine freeze that actually slowed, let alone halted, settlement expansion. In retrospect, it probably would have been more helpful if they had avoided raising the issue entirely.

It is possible for American administrations to pick limited fights with Israel, although the fundamental American commitment to Israel's security is not the subject of any debate. But the Eisenhower, Nixon, Carter and George H.W. Bush administrations all had carefully calculated confrontations with Israeli governments over specific issues and were fundamentally successful. Ronald Reagan, too, batted aside Israeli objections regarding the sale of AWACS observation planes to Saudi Arabia. So it's not as if the American government is unable to take on Israel and its American allies if it wants or needs to.

But all of these confrontations preceded the era in which a two-state peace agreement was declared "vital" to American interests. Since then, no real fight has taken place as Israel has pursued policies, particularly settlement expansion, that make its realization more remote.

The Palestinians, of course, are also an important factor. Not only does an American administration require the will to act aggressively on peace, it needs some sense that there is a prospect of success. That depends in no small measure on believing that there is a Palestinian partner that can be relied upon. Yasser Arafat played just such a role with Bill Clinton during the Wye River negotiations, which ultimately set the stage for the collapse of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's first term in office.

Now that he's back in the premiership, the Americans have once again found Netanyahu both personally and politically impossible to deal with on peace-related issues. But they've also found the Palestinian leadership to be, from their point of view, infuriating, particularly with regard to settlements and efforts to secure greater recognition at the UN.

Under the Obama administration, the United States has precisely come to see itself as "wanting peace more than the parties themselves," whether that's true or not. It views the Israeli leadership as belligerent and intransigent and the Palestinian leadership as petulant and incorrigible.

To this are added the domestic political constraints that allow partisan and personal politics to trump policy and the national interest. The consequence has been that the United States has all but bowed out from the pursuit of an interest that has almost unanimously been deemed vital but is now becoming increasingly regarded as unachievable.

Obviously it's only unachievable, however, if it never was actually vital. Domestic politics, obstructionism or the interests of others couldn't really be allowed to stand in the way of the achievement of a genuinely vital security interest of a global superpower. Americans have to stop kidding themselves and decide which part of their contemporary mantra about Middle East peace is false: Is it vital, or is it subject to the will and veto of others?

If Israeli-Palestinian peace is not actually a vital United States national security interest, Americans are going to have to seriously and honestly count the costs of accepting failure for the foreseeable future. But if it is still considered vital, as it should be, then Americans are going to have to abandon the traditional caveat.

Whoever wins the coming presidential election, Americans must indeed want peace more than the parties themselves, act resolutely on that understanding, and stop allowing domestic politics to trump the US national interest.

TAGS: [Internal American Politics](#) [2] [Peace Negotiations](#) [3]

[Events](#) | [Daily News](#) | [About Us](#) | [Resources](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Donate](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

[!\[\]\(c507f772dba2b921f86777f01218e570_img.jpg\) Front Page Features](#) [!\[\]\(a75296508989caaa77a08d26cfccd4e5_img.jpg\) World Press Roundup](#) [!\[\]\(55463e2fc8fd9dd5cdf6584182081aba_img.jpg\) ATFP in the News](#) [!\[\]\(fef9323b6f87c1ae579afe2ce735bcc8_img.jpg\) Policy and Analysis](#)
[!\[\]\(0c1e77eec6e67077ed981b817d31e302_img.jpg\) Briefing Summaries](#)

Source URL (retrieved on Apr 3 2020 - 10:59pm):

http://www.americantaskforce.org/daily_news_article/2012/09/04/peace_%E2%80%9Cvital%E2%80%9D_american

Links:

[1] <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=433041>

[2] http://www.americantaskforce.org/internal_american_politics

[3] http://www.americantaskforce.org/peace_negotiations