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A campaign to talk up a two-state solution

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<http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-campaign-to-talk-up-a-two-state-solutio...>

[1]

The White House announcement that President Obama will not bring a peace initiative on his upcoming trip to Israel and the West Bank [2] reinforces the sense that he sees the visit as an opportunity to reset ties with both the Israeli and Palestinian peoples at the start of his second term.

There is, of course, value in bolstering public support for intergovernmental relations. It is hard to conceive of any sort of breakthrough between Israeli and Palestinian leaders so long as the public on both sides are so skeptical of progress.

Yet if the White House focuses on people, and not just on governments, and points to significant statements that leaders on both sides have made, the result could be real progress.

There are still majorities — albeit shrinking ones — for a two-state solution. Polls show, however, that each side is convinced the other does not accept a two-state solution.

Because both Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas are risk-averse, only support from their respective constituencies will alter the risk-benefit calculus when it comes to making concessions. Ironically, these public attitudes that constrain the leaders are often created or reinforced by the leaders' own negative messaging.

Despite their differences, however, Netanyahu and Abbas have made some significant public statements on key issues in recent years.

In his speech to a joint session of Congress [3] in 2011, for example, Netanyahu announced that “We seek a peace .??. in which [the Palestinians will] be neither Israel’s subjects nor its citizens. They should enjoy a national life of dignity as a free, viable and independent people living in their own state.”

Abbas said publicly in June 2010 [4]: “Nobody denies the Jewish history in the Middle East. A third of [the] holy Koran talks about the Jews in the Middle East, in this area. Nobody from our side, at least, denies that the Jews were in Palestine, were in the Middle East.”

Later that year [5], Abbas said, “We can put an end to the conflict and to the historical demands. .??. When we have an agreement and sign this agreement, nobody from both sides is allowed to talk about historical demands.”

Unfortunately, many such positive statements are often overlooked or forgotten, as they are sporadic and not coordinated so as to maximize their impact. People then remember the damaging statements of one side, forgetting the positive. And one side alone will not make generous statements, fearing pillory by the hard-liners from within, who believe that such moves will not be reciprocated. For such messaging to be effective, it should not be fragmented or episodic but, rather, repeated to optimize impact.

The question then is whether these leaders are willing to make a concerted effort to repeat such statements as part of a virtuous cycle, whereby one statement would reinforce another, rather than undermine it.

Public attitudes are especially crucial to peacemaking now that the era of larger-than-life leaders who blazed the path to peace has passed. There is no Anwar Sadat or Yitzhak Rabin to mobilize the moderate majority in each public. In the past, these majorities followed their bold leaders; today, public skepticism and cynicism prevent leaders from leading. A shift in public attitudes will not be easy, but it is a prerequisite for decisive political action.

The main Palestinian fear is that Israel will extend its borders all the way to the Jordan River, effectively annexing the West Bank and prolonging the occupation indefinitely. Palestinians point to ongoing settlement expansion as evidence of Israel’s lack of sincerity in achieving peace. They fear that the peace process will merely produce more process, never leading to Palestinian sovereignty.

The main Israeli fear is that the Palestinian Authority will not accept the moral legitimacy of Israel as a state for the Jewish people, with equal rights for all of its citizens. They point to Abbas’s statements on Jerusalem as questioning a Jewish historical connection to the city. In March 2010, in a speech to a summit of the Arab League [6], which was broadcast by Al-Jazeera, he said, “Jerusalem and its environs are a trust that Allah entrusted to us. Saving it [Jerusalem] from the settlement monster and the danger of Judaization and [land] confiscation is a personal [Islamic] commandment incumbent on all of us.” Israelis see this point as critical, especially given negative depictions of Israel in the Palestinian media and the rejectionism of extremist groups such as Hamas. Ultimately they, too, fear that the Palestinians do not want to end the conflict.

In his visit, Obama should insist that senior officials from both sides publicly and consistently reiterate fundamental principles to allay the basic fears of the other’s citizens. He should make it clear that the United States is listening and will be critical of negative messaging.

What’s in it for the leaders should be equally clear: If either hopes to extract a similar statement from the other, he must make one himself. To be sustainable, positive messaging must be both unambiguous and

reciprocal.

Although it is easy to despair over the current stalemate, re-engaging the skeptical publics of both sides is attainable — and necessary, if progress is to be achieved.

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