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## Yes He Can Make Peace

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The Palestinians and the Israelis will not give the newly re-elected President time to breathe. In November, Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas will request that the General Assembly recognize Palestine as a non-member state with observer status. The Israeli government has decided that the Palestinians should be punished for their *chutzpah* in doing exactly what Israel did in 1948 and 1949—trying to get international recognition of their existence as a State. Obama will also need to take decisive and rapid action to pre-empt what could be an emerging collapse of the Palestinian Authority and perhaps even a return to violence. If economic sanctions are placed on the Palestinian Authority it will fail to pay its bills, including the salaries that provide livelihood for more than one million Palestinians.

A renewed U.S.-led diplomatic effort is essential, a genuine plan to reach political agreements between Israel and the Palestinians immediately after Israeli elections and the establishment of a new Israeli government early in 2013. There is no room for failure or experimentation. The parties need to see that Obama is determined to demonstrate his firm unwavering commitment to act on the interests of the United States as voiced at the outset of his first term when he declared that the resolution of the Israeli-Arab conflict is a U.S. national strategic interest.

Benjamin Netanyahu is likely to continue to perceive Obama's efforts as undermining Israel's national security requirements. Obama will need to provide assurances to Netanyahu that in the end of the process Israel's security will not be compromised and that the Palestinians will recognize Israel as the national homeland of the Jewish people. This kind of assurance must be given discreetly between the President and the Prime Minister and not held up as the breaking point of Palestinian engagement.

There is no time to waste. Obama needs a new Middle East team in place immediately. There are several candidates who could step right up to the plate and take the first pitch with little preparation. The best man around for the job is Ambassador Dan Kurtzer, a former Ambassador to Israel and Egypt, on staff in the State Department from the Carter administration, engaged in every round of peace making efforts in the last twenty years and extremely active since leaving State in an enormous array of Track II efforts all around the region. Kurtzer could be assisted by Rob Malley, currently with the International Crisis Group, a former senior staff person in Clinton's National Security Council. These two experienced diplomats and experts know all of the issues and the players inside-out. They also know that AIPAC and other mainstream U.S. Jewish groups may perceive their appointment as a threat; their positions on the parameters of peace are very well known in Washington. One possible mitigating mechanism against resistance on the domestic side might be to build into the process a mechanism for ongoing consultations with AIPAC leadership. The same should be done with the leadership of groups like the American Task Force on Palestine.

The key to their success would have to be quiet and decisive diplomacy. The immediate damage control and crisis management must be undertaken without the usual fanfare and bold statements. Now is not the time for speeches. The U.S. needs to reach an understanding with the Israeli government and the Palestinian leadership that the U.N. vote would be allowed to go through without U.S. and Israeli objection. The U.S. would play a significant role in drafting the resolution. In exchange the Palestinians would undertake an obligation that they will not submit legal action against Israel in any international body while the U.S. is undertaking its new diplomatic strategy. The Palestinians and Israel would agree to enter into direct and intensive negotiations on permanent status immediately after the new Israeli government is formed in 2013.

The Kurtzer-Malley team would work with Obama and other key members of the administration to devise a plan and a strategy that will lead to facilitated negotiations between the parties. A continued U.S. commitment to Israel's security must be constantly demonstrated by words and by actions, particularly when relating to the issue of delineating a border between the two states. Palestinians must receive the assurance from the Obama administration that the President is serious this time and that the outcome will be a viable, demilitarized Palestinian state next to Israel. The parties must know that the U.S. team will play an active role in putting bridging proposals on the table to close gaps between them—and also provide the guarantees necessary for monitoring the process of implementation.

Obama should also create a task force led by President Clinton and former-Secretary of State James Baker to enlist and consolidate international support, political and financial, to provide the sustenance and nutrition necessary to ensure that resources will be available to translate agreements into implementation. There must be a U.S. led international effort behind the process including active participation of the Arab world in order to provide the extra incentives and political risk insurance for the leaders to make tough decisions.

The parties, once engaged, have to tune down the noise, the public speeches and grandstanding; the spoilers will surely play that role. The experts also know that as progress is made in negotiations, real positive changes must be made on the ground so that people see that their lives are getting better. Working with leaders such as Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and with the private sectors in Israel and Palestine to translate political developments into action will help to keep public opinion behind the renewed peace process. Much advice can be given on strategies and tactics which will have to develop quickly and decisively.

It is important not to set out on a path of antagonism towards the leaders in Israel and Palestine. Obama must clearly act on U.S. interests and at the same time be keenly sensitive to politics of both sides, without surrendering to them. An early presidential visit to Israel and Palestine, addressing the people on both sides directly, will help to set the process in motion. The U.S. wants the President to lead. President Obama disappointed many people in America and in the world during his first term. He made history as the first African-American president; now he must begin to shape his legacy as one of the great Presidents of the United States of America.

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