Palestine and Israel in the New Regional Context

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The United States is striving to achieve Palestinian-Israeli peace amid a backdrop of increasing unrest in the Arab world. To borrow an image from quantum physics, we are speeding up to try to protect the peace process from the powerful gravitational pull of a developing Middle East black hole.

Secretary of State John Kerry deserves applause for his serious and tireless efforts to end this conflict. As a Palestinian-American, a Jerusalemite displaced by the 1948 war, and, for the past 10 years, a full-time advocate for a two-state solution, my dream of an independent Palestine living in peace with Israel is still alive. But it has become inextricably intertwined with other Middle Eastern issues.

The meltdowns spreading throughout the region require a more holistic American approach to avoid even more widespread chaos. Securing American policy goals in the region requires rethinking traditional policies that favor short-term interests over long-term stability.

In Syria the number of dead has long exceeded 100,000 and there are increasing reports of the unspeakable use of chemical and heavy weapons against rebels and civilians. There has been an average of 30 car bombs per month over the past three months in Iraq. Assassinations are destabilizing Tunisia; militias run uncontrolled in Libya; and there is growing instability in Yemen and Lebanon. Egypt, with its undoubted regional influence and centrality, has seen the ouster of two presidents in as many years. Its revolutionary turmoil reverberates throughout the region, and rages at the doorsteps of the future Palestinian state.

The convulsions in the Middle East are not just a regional problem, they are threatening to the global economy and stability. It would be unwise to dismiss them as distant or unimportant.

Solving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict will not be a panacea for all the ills of the region. But it would have a significant positive impact on many ongoing problems faced by Middle Easterners and the United States alike. It is the single thing the United States could help do that would most improve the general atmosphere in the Middle East.

Many Arab societies are trapped in a false binary between authoritarian governments and Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. But within these societies there are many disconnected and neglected islands of support for non-sectarian, pluralistic, tolerant, accountable and transparent orders based on the consent of the governed. It is time for the United States to identify and support, in a sustained, strategic and long-term policy, these moderate, centrist forces. They exist, and, with sufficient help, can be key players in transitioning to

more open systems. We cannot do it for them, but we can help them do it.

There is no magic formula, one-size-fits-all, or instant cure for the deep-seated problems in the Middle East and the Arab world. Transforming the political culture of the region, and helping it find its own solutions consistent with globally accepted norms, but without imposing Western models, is a generational project.

There is no reason to believe that it's impossible for Arab states to join the rest of the world as equal partners with the West and all the other societies that are moving forward as part of a global community and economy. The problem is that, both in the Middle East and the United States, there has never been enough belief in, or support for, this project. Such skepticism is a self-fulfilling prophecy that should be abandoned.

The United States would be well advised to embark on a concomitant, long term, and focused policy of regional engagement that seeks to support moderate and centrist forces in the Arab world, as it continues to secure Palestinian-Israeli peace. The great people of Egypt, for example, are searching for alternatives to their present political choices: a traditionally authoritarian state versus intolerant and sectarian religious extremists. Palestinians deserve an open political horizon beyond a dysfunctional Fatah and a fanatical and terror-designated Hamas. Syrians need an end to their national nightmare, and a chance to rebuild their country and their lives. Our policies can help these societies achieve such goals.

The long-term objective must be to help empower open-minded, tolerant Arab groups to develop their own path to modernity based on the consent of the governed, job-producing economies, the rule of law, and respect for the rights of all citizens, including individuals, minorities and women.

We should do everything in our power to ensure Palestinian-Israeli peace, and never stop trying to achieve that vital goal. Meanwhile, we would do well to rethink our fundamental approach to the Middle East, and systematically help Arab societies transform their political cultures. Otherwise the black hole will continue devouring everything within its reach, harming not only the region but also our national interests.

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