

"Negotiations Now: Don't Wait"

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Wars, though easy to start, are difficult to end. By changing the political status quo, a war inevitably creates windows of opportunity; in such a context, the challenge for policymakers is to be bold enough to strategically shape new realities. Before the current conflict ends, secret and public diplomacy must endeavor to establish contacts with the parties involved, frame an interim objective -- a Lebanese-Israeli Accord - - and finally provide potential connectives to a longer-term goal: renewal of Syrian-Israeli negotiations.

Current conditions and lessons from previous negotiations point to a potentially successful negotiating outcome. However, less than three weeks remain before the windows of opportunity close and the status quo begins to congeal.

Before examining the aforementioned conditions and lessons, one point must be highlighted. The notion that progress can be made quickly and the impatience it yields are wrong-headed. British Prime Minister Tony Blair's reported remark to President Bush prior to end of G-8 summit, that if Secretary Rice "goes out [to the region] she's got to succeed," is, with all respect, flat out wrong. She, or an appointed envoy, does not need to succeed; rather, he or she needs to listen. For three months after the 1973 War, Middle Eastern diplomats and leaders visited Washington. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger made three separate trips to Jerusalem, Cairo, and Damascus, with nothing in his briefcase except the objective of listening, and the goal of shaping an interim agreement. In 1991, Secretary of State James Baker undertook more than nine trips to the Middle East to cobble together the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference.

With an appropriate attitude toward the timeline of negotiations, policymakers should focus on the following seven points that will direct them toward an endgame. First, step-by-step diplomacy, in the manner undertaken by Kissinger, is the proven approach that can take this conflict to a cease-fire and beyond. It can include shuttle missions by diplomats to Washington or mediators to the Middle East; most advantageous would be continuous engagement by an envoy or two, like Kissinger's mediation of the May 1974 Syrian-Israeli agreement,

President Carter's committed participation at the Camp David summit in 1978, or the narrowing of differences by any number of U.S. envoys working in the Middle East in the 1980s and 1990s.

Second, these negotiations can succeed now because the situation is dire -- there is "ripeness." This ripeness allows the parties to focus their energy on their common desired outcome: both Israel and the Lebanese government want Beirut to control all its territory, free from militia presence.

Third, negotiations require specific, agreed philosophical guidelines, which exist in U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559 (2004) and in the U.N. Roed-Larsen Report (2005). In essence, these parameters called for the disbanding and disarmament of all militias, the extension of Lebanese government control over all Lebanese territory, strict respect toward Lebanese sovereignty, and the demarcation of borders between the Syria and Lebanon.

Fourth, a U.N. cease-fire resolution can be constructed with the following elements: a statement about the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states in the region, the establishment of demilitarized zones, the establishment of a multilateral or U.N. stabilization force alongside the Lebanese army, the termination of the essentially ineffective 2,000-man U.N. force presently in southern Lebanon, the resolution of the hostage issue, and constant consultation with Israel, Lebanon, and other parties concerned (read: Syria). From the mediation, a Lebanese-Israeli accord or disengagement agreement, not a treaty, should be the immediate diplomatic objective.

Fifth, the negotiations need to publicly confirm to the Lebanese people and to their government that the EU, the Quartet, and the Arab states will support Lebanese reconstruction. Because the Shia are such an integral part of Lebanese society and government, funds for social services that can begin to cut to the core of Hizbollah's popular support are necessary, along with funds for the reconstruction of Lebanese infrastructure. Not knowing the extent of Hizbollah's degradation by this conflict, should not deter mediation.

Sixth, Syria needs to be enveloped, not isolated. It is critical to play to

Syrian national interests. Historically and cleverly, Syria has used changes in regional power alignments to reposition itself in order to strengthen its regime and its national needs. It has a track record of doing the unconventional in regional politics, such that Syrian engagement in negotiations, even if it is tacit, is not out of the question. Public scolding of Syria should be replaced by quiet exchanges with the Assad government. Merely saying that Syria is unimportant puts one's head in the sand. Allowing Syria a veto to a negotiated outcome should likewise not be tolerated. What is needed is a quiet probing of Damascus: identify and quantify the incentives required to promote Syrian support for a stronger Lebanon. Syrian leaders have always been interested in knowing how today's politics and diplomacy will affect Syria tomorrow. During the 1973 War, though the U.S. did not have diplomatic relations with Syria, Kissinger engaged Damascus.

This relationship proved fruitful for months of subsequent negotiations. Secretary Rice, Javier Solana, Terje Roed-Larsen, or a combination of them should, if they have not already, privately engage the Syrian leadership. A port of entry might be Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Mouallem.

Finally, distractions about the Palestinian issue or worry about active Syrian engagement should not preclude a diplomatic effort. Neither fear of failing nor America's domestic calendar is a reason to stay on the sidelines of mediation. For the time being, Iran must be bypassed in order to focus on strengthening Lebanon and welding a formal Lebanese-Israeli understanding. Successful mediation in this conflict demands active support from surrounding Arab states and an audacious and persistent mediator. Laissez-faire diplomacy will only make it easier for Hizbollah to fight another day.

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