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The Boston Globe

Endgame diplomacy for Mideast

By Sam Bahour and Geoffrey Lewis | May 16, 2009

PRESIDENT OBAMA has acknowledged that "we can't talk forever" about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "At some point," he said recently, "steps have to be taken so that people can see progress on the ground." This attitude sheds a cautious ray of hope that the United States may be finally considering a policy shift gauged by facts on the ground instead of the number of meetings held to discuss a peace process. This is a wise starting point.

The 41 years of Israeli occupation of Palestinians works to neither side's advantage. It is clear the situation on the ground is a powder keg waiting to explode, yet again.

Obama's positive statements about the Arab Peace Initiative are welcome. So, too, is Obama's appointment of Senator George Mitchell as his Mideast envoy.

While contemplating which way to turn at this historic juncture, all interested parties would be advised to keep in mind that another colossal failure of the international community, such as has been the norm for so long, could cause the situation to deteriorate to a point of no return.

A powerful "friendly interventionist" is necessary. The parties themselves, Israelis and Palestinians, have proven that they are unable to resolve this conflict bilaterally. This should not be breaking news. An occupying power and an occupied people - anywhere - will find it impossible to resolve their differences given such an imbalance of power. What would be breaking news is the point at which the international community - led by the United States - takes concrete action to effect a real, just, and lasting solution to the conflict.

This is why Obama's immediate attention to this conflict is key and he must act decisively now. America played the role of "friendly interventionist" in Northern Ireland and it seems, with the appointment of Mitchell, that Obama may be contemplating playing the same role in the Middle East. This would be a welcome shift in policy.

The following key obstacles to peace must be addressed by such a shift:

Hope. People need hope that it really could happen in the Middle East. Northern Ireland is a perfect example of where it did.

Leverage. A powerful and influential friend has to help make it happen. This is what America has to do in the Middle East as it did in Northern Ireland, where it had much less influence.

Participation. The people most affected must be made to become involved by having them vote on a plan. This is what all the people on the island of Ireland did.

Livelihood. While not a replacement for inalienable rights of any party in the conflict, the "carrot" of economic benefits and jobs should not be underestimated. Nothing less than a Marshall Plan for the Middle East is required.

Self-Determination. It is a must that all parties be given the right to have legitimate and sovereign political power, thus a Palestinian state must be realized and be in line with international law.

Leadership. Politicians need to have sufficient political "cover" to do the right thing. If the majority of Israelis and Palestinians vote for the plan, this creates a safeguard for politicians to remain sincere to people's desires.

Addressing all of these obstacles is within reach if the political will exists in the White House.

There have been many failures in the Middle East peace process, including the blockading of the Gaza Strip, the firing of missiles into southern Israel, and the Israeli offensive in Gaza. The room to maneuver has never been narrower and the stakes of failure higher. The Obama administration should follow the model of success that took place in Northern Ireland and become the "friendly interventionist" that both sides - and the world - desperately need.

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