

The PLO Must Launch an Initiative Before the Netanyahu-Trump Meeting

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On February 15th Prime Minister Netanyahu will sit down with President Trump to discuss the Middle East and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Mr. Netanyahu will tell the new President a) Don't try to be the deal-maker who solves the conflict. There is no Palestinian partner for peace. b) Palestine is not really important to what is happening in the region. What is important is Iran, and the war of civilizations; Isis and the struggle within Islam.

This meeting, coming before any direct contact between the PLO and the new Administration, is the most important event facing the Palestinian leadership. It will help determine President Trump's relationship to the conflict for years to come. President Abbas has no private channel to Mr. Trump. He must act quickly and boldly to demonstrate that Netanyahu is wrong, that the PLO seeks to end the conflict, and that the Palestinians do matter. Here are initiatives he should consider:

1. Call on President Trump, consistent with the terms of the Arab Peace Initiative, to put on the table a fully developed draft treaty that addresses all of the issues of the conflict. Propose that Israel and the PLO negotiate for six months to see if they can agree on improvements to the President's draft. After six months, commit that the PLO will either give a clear Yes, a clear No, or will submit this treaty to a referendum of the Palestinian people. Call on Israel to make the same pledge.
2. At the same time, announce that the PLO is willing to enter negotiations based on the six principles contained in Secretary of State John Kerry's final speech on the conflict. These include borders based on the 1967 lines modified by equivalent swaps, a Palestinian capital in Jerusalem, and a fair resolution of the refugee issue. With respect to the Jewish State issue, Kerry did not call for recognition of Israel as a Jewish state, he called for negotiations which would "Fulfill the vision of UN General Assembly Resolution 181 of two states for two peoples, one Jewish and one Arab." As Kerry pointed out, the Palestinian Declaration of Independence already accepted the Partition Resolution. The PLO should accept the six Kerry principles and challenge Israel to do so as well.
3. Alternatively, President Abbas could release to the public the secret framework for negotiations agreed upon in negotiations with Israeli General Sneh (retired) who represented Israeli opposition leader Isaac Herzog. President Abbas could announce his willingness to resume negotiations based on that framework. Doing this would put the ball in Israel's court, and would make clear that the problem is Mr. Netanyahu's refusal to accept that framework.

4. President Abbas should call for a special meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, at which they would reject the notion that there is a War of Civilizations, and they would reaffirm, and elevate in public consciousness, worldwide, their endorsement of the Arab Peace Initiative and the promise of normal relations between the Islamic countries and Israel, if the terms of the API are met. Further, President Abbas should proclaim the "Palestinian Way" -- liberal democracy within an Islamic society -- as the model for Islamic countries, with an emphasis on full equality for women and freedom of religion as found in the Palestinian Declaration of Independence.

5. Finally, and perhaps most important, President Abbas should call upon Iran to empower the Palestinian people by making a clear statement that it is joining the Arab Peace Initiative, that it, like the Arab States, offers Israel normal relations, if Israel meets the terms of the Arab peace initiative. If Iran does join the API, this would place peace with the Palestinians in the center of world affairs. And even if Iran does not, this initiative would establish Palestine as a player in the central regional issue.

Taken together this series of initiatives will transform President Trump's perceptions prior to his sitting down with Prime Minister Netanyahu. It will draw Mr. Trump towards his desire to be the ultimate deal maker, and it will demonstrate that Palestine matters.

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