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Engaging Europe on Behalf of Middle East Peace

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The Middle East peace process should be one of the main foreign policy priorities of the incoming U.S. administration—not least because of the rapidly diminishing feasibility of a two-state settlement and the danger of a renewed escalation of violence. A strong commitment by the president-elect will be critical to keep a negotiating process going in the months of transition. European foreign ministers have identified Middle East peace-making as one of Europe's top priorities for cooperation with the incoming U.S. administration. The United States should therefore engage the Europeans who could—with U.S. backing and within the framework of the Quartet—sustain peace talks until the new U.S. administration's Middle East team is in place and can take the lead again.

Once the new administration is in place, the United States should move from facilitating to mediating an active and consistent process to help the parties overcome their differences. Experience so far has shown that while the outline of a permanent settlement is well-known, mere facilitation has not led to compromise. This has been the case because strong veto groups in Israel and the Palestinian territories prevent the majority consensus in both societies (which still exists, though it is becoming increasingly slim) in favor of a two-state settlement from translating into actual policies and compromises. Therefore, a strong third party is needed to bridge the gaps and back moderate forces in both societies. Such an approach would also include monitoring the parties' compliance with agreements, providing bridging proposals for a final status settlement in due time, and offering for a presence on the ground to oversee implementation of a final status agreement and peacekeeping afterwards. In these areas, the new U.S. administration should ask Europeans to assume responsibility and share the burdens.

The United States and Europe should support reconciliation—or at least a renewed power-sharing agreement—among Palestinian factions including Hamas in order to provide Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas with the necessary backing for negotiations and to avoid further intra-Palestinian violence. Neither institution building, security efforts, nor economic development can yield sustainable progress as long as the Palestinian Authority remains split. The United States should therefore endorse the reconciliation talks currently mediated by Egypt and backed by the Arab League by signalling readiness to accept an interim government composed of all factions. The United States should also call on the European Union (the EU and its member states being the main donors to the Palestinians) to continue their financial assistance via the Palestinian single treasury account in case Hamas joins a Palestinian transition government that will prepare for elections. Above all, the new U.S. administration should abstain from arming and training Fatah linked militias, as such an approach bears the real and concrete danger of fomenting civil war.

Among the short-term priorities for the United States and EU should be creating an environment in which economic development is possible. World Bank reports have clearly identified restrictions on movement within the Palestinian territories as the main obstacle to a sustained economic upturn. European financial support, which has increased immensely over the last few years, will thus remain ineffective if it is not accompanied by measures aimed at reducing these restrictions. While it is legitimate for Israel to take measures to protect its citizens from violence, much more can be done to minimize disruptions of trade and Palestinians' daily lives, even under continued occupation. The next U.S. administration should have their high-ranking military officers in the Palestinian territories draw up plans, in cooperation with their Israeli and Palestinian counterparts, that allow for the speedy and sustained reduction of movement restrictions in the West Bank. It should also make a permanent reopening of Gaza's border crossings and implementation of the 2005 Rafah Agreement on Movement and Access a priority. And it should initiate talks with all parties (Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Hamas and Egypt) to find an arrangement that allows for the reopening of the Rafah Crossing on the Egypt-Gaza border as well as the redeployment of the European border monitors (EU BAM Rafah.)

Finally, the next U.S. administration should encourage a move from indirect talks to direct negotiations on the Israeli-Syrian track—not least because an Israeli-Syrian peace deal may well affect positively Israeli-Palestinian as well as Israeli-Lebanese relations—and strengthen efforts at conflict management and mitigation on the Israeli-Lebanese front.

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