

BICOM Research Paper



What can Britain do? Principles and Proposals for a British Contribution to Israeli-Palestinian Peace

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BICOM

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Front cover:

Foreign Secretary William Hague meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Tel Aviv

Israel Government Press Office

Foreign Secretary William Hague meeting Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Dr. Salam Fayyad at his office in Ramallah

British Consulate-General, Jerusalem

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CONTENTS

Summary	02
1. Introduction	04
2. Principles for Involvement	05
Maintain trust with the parties	05
Focus on genuine need	05
Do not substitute the negotiating parties	06
Focus on improving, rather than solving	06
Avoid creating attractions away from the negotiating table	07
Let the parties take the credit	07
3. Proposals for a UK Role	08
Positioning the UK for contribution	08
Specific proposals	09
Outside in: the regional dimension	09
Inside out: civil society initiatives	12
Top down: facilitating political agreement	13
Bottom up: state building	14
4. Concluding Observations	16

SUMMARY

This BICOM research paper presents general principles and specific proposals for an effective UK contribution to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. It has been produced by BICOM in consultation with former senior officials and analysts involved in Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, and follows a series of events and meetings with current and former British officials in London.

Principles for Involvement

The overarching role of the UK and other international third parties should be creating the conditions in which the peace process is most likely to succeed. This can best be achieved by adhering to the following six principles, which are the bedrock of effective UK engagement.

1. Maintain trust with the parties.
2. Focus on genuine need.
3. Do not substitute the negotiating parties.
4. Focus on improving, rather than solving.
5. Avoid creating attractions away from the negotiating table.
6. Let the parties take the credit.

Proposals For a UK Role

Positioning the UK for contribution

The perception that has developed in some quarters, that the UK is a hub for anti-Israel activity, has the potential to damage the UK's image as a balanced, effective and trustworthy interlocutor. The government must be proactive in countering this perception by being forthright in its support for a two state solution and opposing the delegitimisation of either negotiating party.

Britain's contribution will be further enhanced by maintaining close cooperation with the US. In addition, it is important for the UK to adopt a principled position against one-side initiatives at the UN.

Specific proposals

There are a number of areas in which the UK can make a practical difference with specific activities. These can be grouped into four categories:

1. **Outside in:** Create a regional environment conducive to Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking by:
 - i. limiting spoiler capacity and legitimising peace;
 - ii. providing material and political support to the Palestinian Authority (PA);
 - iii. reviving regional cooperation.
2. **Inside out:** Develop civil society and grass roots support for an end of conflict agreement by:
 - i. highlighting the benefits of peace;
 - ii. facilitating peace orientated education;
 - iii. establishing a coexistence fund.

SUMMARY

3. **Top down:** Facilitate a negotiated Israeli-Palestinian political settlement through:
 - i. discreet post agreement planning.
4. **Bottom up:** Assist preparations for a functioning and responsible Palestinian state by:
 - i. rehabilitating refugee camps and poor areas in Palestinian territory;
 - ii. adopting a specific development project;
 - iii. seconding British expertise to the PA.

1. INTRODUCTION

For many countries, Britain included, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not just an issue that attracts significant media attention and stirs deep public emotions. The intractability of the conflict is seen as a destabilising factor in international relations and its resolution is seen as a way of advancing national security interests for states well beyond the immediate theatre of the conflict. The precise nature of the linkages between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other sources of instability in the Middle East are sometimes exaggerated, and often disputed. However, there is little doubt that resolving this conflict, or at least advancing its resolution, could help produce a more stable and secure Middle East, with strategic benefits that would resonate internationally.

In Britain's case there is, of course, a special historical connection to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. The British Mandate for Palestine ended without genuine reconciliation between competing Jewish and Palestinian national claims. For the UK, seeking ways to contribute to the conflict's resolution not only makes sense politically, and advances Britain's broader foreign policy interests, it is perceived by many as something of a historic and moral obligation.

The UK also has the potential to make a significant contribution because of its global influence. The UK benefits from a special relationship with the US, a central role in the EU, its permanent membership and veto power at the UN Security Council, and its strong bilateral relationships around the Middle East and the wider world. Most importantly the UK has, generally speaking, managed to retain a degree of trust with both sides, has avoided unbalanced positions, and has earned a reputation for putting the interests of advancing peace ahead of its own publicity and prestige. This is an asset that should not be squandered.

The difficulty for many states genuinely concerned with advancing a resolution to the conflict lies in finding ways to contribute that actually make a positive difference. It is no doubt a source of frustration to many countries that while their interests are affected by developments in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, their capacity to influence events can sometimes be quite limited.

It is easy enough for third parties to create the appearance of 'being involved' in the peace process. Some states and leaders seek little more than this and reap whatever political and public relations benefits this kind of superficial association can yield. By contrast, making a real positive difference is both necessary and possible, but requires detailed familiarity with the terrain, a relationship of mutual respect and intimacy with both sides, and a degree of modesty that can be a rare commodity on the international scene.

This research paper, the second in the BICOM series on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,¹ seeks to develop some guidelines for constructive international involvement in the peace process. It also presents specific ideas for what Britain can do to help the parties meet their obligations to progress towards conflict resolution. It has been produced by BICOM in consultation with former senior officials and analysts involved in Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, and follows a series of events and meetings with current and former British officials in London.

¹ For the first paper in the series see BICOM, "Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations: A Guide to the Issues, Players and Prospects" (September 2010), www.bicom.org.uk/files/BICOM_ResearchPaper1_Negotiations.pdf

2. PRINCIPLES FOR INVOLVEMENT

As efforts to launch and sustain meaningful direct negotiations persist, the role of third states and organisations in advancing Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts demands careful consideration. As mentioned in the first BICOM paper in this series, international endorsement and support for any agreement eventually reached between the parties will be critical, but assistance during negotiations must focus on those areas where international actors can make a real difference. The following are some suggested guidelines – some dos and don'ts – that can help create a context for developing policies and initiatives on the Israeli-Palestinian track that are both feasible and effective.

1. Maintain trust with the parties

Both Israel and the Palestinian Authority will listen most to those it believes understands them and their concerns. This requires first and foremost a sustained investment in developing ties with Israeli and Palestinian leaders. International leaders who can establish credibility with both their Israeli and Palestinian counterparts can develop latitude to influence and persuade. Taking a nuanced and balanced position in public rhetoric is an important element of this. Public statements which do not acknowledge legitimate concerns on both sides risk undermining trust. Being quick to apportion blame to one side or the other can be counterproductive, and encourage intransigence on the other side. Third parties are likely to be seen as more relevant by Israelis and Palestinians if they have leverage and trust with both sides.

Both Israel and the Palestinian Authority will listen most to those it believes understands them and their concerns.

2. Focus on genuine need

Any serious approach to contributing to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process requires a genuine assessment of where added value can be provided, and an honest evaluation of the contributing state's strengths and weaknesses. Too many states and international organisations seem to be interested in participating for participation's sake with little regard for what facilitating actual progress may require.

After nearly two decades of on-again off-again negotiations, it is rare indeed for the parties to need more conferences or political declarations. But there are many areas, explored later in this paper, where international assistance can be critical for creating the conditions most conducive to a negotiated agreement.

The importance of focusing on genuine need does not relate only to the correct and efficient use of resources and the maintenance of international credibility. It is about reinforcing the trust of the parties by demonstrating that the first priority of the contributing state is how to do good not how to look good.

In each case, third party involvement should not be treated as a matter of entitlement or prestige. It should respond to real need and result from a demonstrated capacity of the contributing party to encourage or facilitate progress on the ground.

2. PRINCIPLES FOR INVOLVEMENT

3. Do not substitute the negotiating parties

It is the parties themselves that must want a peace agreement, be persuaded that it is in their interests, and take ownership of the decisions and risks it entails. This is not only the way in which an agreement is likely to be politically acceptable, it is also the best guarantee that it will be implemented in practice.

While there may be occasions where, in consultation with the parties, efforts to bridge gaps or resolve controversial and complex issues could benefit from outside involvement, international assistance can often be better invested elsewhere. In the Israeli-Palestinian context, unsolicited third party negotiating proposals, especially on core issues, tend to be difficult politically for one or the other party to accept, lest they be suspected of adopting a position out of coercion rather than self-interest. Such proposals often lack sufficient familiarity with details and with the political sensibilities of the parties themselves. As a result, they can miss key ingredients or nuances that make an idea potentially acceptable and can complicate rather than ease subsequent efforts to reach agreement.

Too often, the call for third party involvement in the actual content of the negotiations takes responsibility away from the parties and undermines both their capacity and their responsibility for engaging one another directly to reach an acceptable outcome. The third party can quickly become the focus of the parties' attention in an effort to create leverage or point blame rather than search for solutions.

Indeed, excessive third party involvement in negotiations can be decidedly unhelpful, in that it implies that a settlement is something the parties must be pressured into adopting to assuage the outside world, rather than something that they pursue to advance their national interests. This, in turn, risks empowering opponents of an agreement by enabling them to present themselves as the 'true' defenders of the national interest, unwilling to be cowed by international pressure, while portraying advocates of an agreement as lacking commitment to the national cause.

4. Focus on improving, rather than solving

In the Middle East in general, and in the Israeli-Palestinian arena in particular, grand proposals for change by third parties are occasionally the stuff of headlines, but they are rarely translated into the reality on the ground. The situation is too complex, and there are too many forces in the region, many of them negative, beyond the control of even the most effective and sophisticated strategic planner. But while the third party may encounter many situations that seem impossible to solve, there are few that are impossible to improve. Being realistic in one's aims and focusing on areas in which a genuine change is possible is often more effective in producing dynamics within Israeli-Palestinian society, and in the region, that can ease the path to a peaceful settlement.

2. PRINCIPLES FOR INVOLVEMENT

5. Avoid creating attractions away from the negotiating table

Both parties come to the negotiations wary of one another, concerned about the costs of concessions they must make at the table and with a constant eye to alternative options. International actors need to be careful that the initiatives or policies they adopt do not create magnetic attractions away from the negotiating table, seducing either the Palestinian or the Israeli side to hold out for better bargains that the international community may offer.

The first role of international engagement in the process is to encourage the parties to remain at the table as the best way to ultimately resolve their differences. They must avoid creating the impression that there may be better alternatives to a negotiated agreement. This only encourages inflexibility at the table and reduces the chance of progress towards a settlement.

6. Let the parties take the credit

Third parties who make a genuine contribution to peace efforts have a legitimate expectation for political dividends and international acknowledgment. But the process is often better served by giving the parties themselves as much credit as possible for positive change and down-playing the significance of outside intervention. In the end, this is about empowering the parties before their own constituencies in order to make the difficult but necessary decisions for a peace agreement. Modesty, rather than the self-promotion, on the side of the third party, can be significant in this regard.

In the end, this is about empowering the parties before their own constituencies in order to make the difficult but necessary decisions for a peace agreement.

3. PROPOSALS FOR A UK ROLE

Britain already enjoys a relatively unique position in relation to the conflict. In part this is because of its special historical association with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and its perceived role as a bridge across the Atlantic between U.S. and Europe.

Indeed, the UK already contributes considerably to the Israeli-Palestinian track not least through financial contributions to the Palestinian Authority and through its efforts, both within and outside the EU context, to improve the economic and humanitarian situation on the ground. Similarly, the UK has largely been a voice for effective diplomatic engagement within the European Union, rather than mere rhetoric and ‘megaphone diplomacy’.

There are, however, real opportunities for expanding and deepening the nature of Britain’s contribution to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Broadly speaking, the package of initiatives and ideas suggested below can be divided into four spheres:

1. **Outside in:** Create a regional environment conducive to Israeli-Palestinian peace-making.
2. **Inside out:** Develop civil society and grass roots support for an end of conflict agreement.
3. **Bottom up:** Assist preparations for a functioning and responsible Palestinian state.
4. **Top down:** Facilitate a negotiated Israeli-Palestinian political settlement.

Positioning the UK for contribution

Before turning to some specific ideas, it is important to address the issue of how Britain can best be positioned to make an effective contribution to Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts. As noted above, Britain has generally been able to maintain a useful and close relationship with both parties and as a result has been well placed to offer assistance that the parties are able to accept. However, this position is not one that can be assumed. It must be actively cultivated and jealously protected.

Britain has generally been able to maintain a useful and close relationship with both parties...

Britain’s special status in the eyes of the parties has been challenged because of its perceived position as a hub for anti-Israel activity and for efforts to delegitimise Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. These efforts include calls for boycotts against Israel, and the abuse of the UK’s universal jurisdiction laws to trigger arrest warrants against Israeli politicians. Such campaigns run counter to the advancement of mutual respect and coexistence based on two states for two peoples, which is in line British policy and interests.

3. PROPOSALS FOR A UK ROLE

While some of these problematic efforts are outside of the government's control, they nevertheless have the potential to damage the image of the United Kingdom as a balanced, effective and trustworthy interlocutor. In response, proactive measures are required on the part of the government. It must distance itself where necessary, persuade, influence and effect change where possible, and be forthright as to its own positions and policy in favour of a two-state outcome and against the delegitimisation of either negotiating party. This also means clearly distinguishing between legitimate criticism of Israeli or Palestinian policies and the illegitimate denial of the rights of both the Jewish and the Palestinian peoples to self-determination, each in a state of their own, without prejudice to the rights of all citizens and minority groups.

Britain's position will also be enhanced by further developing and maintaining intimate relations with the most influential third party working on this issue, the United States. Operating in coordination with the US, rather than in competition, will enhance the UK's capacity to influence affairs in a positive direction and make an effective contribution.

An additional area in which positioning is important relates to the role Britain plays in international bodies that address the conflict, including the UN Security Council, General Assembly and Human Rights Council. It is important to adopt a principled position in these bodies, that recognises the corrosive effect one-sided or politicised initiatives can have on the credibility of the UN system. This is important not only as part of British support for effective multilateral diplomacy, but also because these kinds of initiatives complicate efforts at the negotiating table.

Specific proposals

1. Outside in: the regional dimension

A critical component of a successful negotiating effort is the creation of a regional environment conducive to Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking. This involves multiple steps to which Britain can contribute, especially due to the emphasis it has placed on developing relations with Gulf States and the leading role it plays within the EU context.

At issue is more than merely the talking points that British officials use with their counterparts in the region. The focus here should be developing a peace oriented UK foreign policy that links progress on other issues of concern to regional states to demonstrated contributions to a pro-peace regional environment.

i. Limiting spoiler capacity and legitimising peace

The least glamorous but possibly most significant contribution of international actors lies in efforts to limit the capacity of spoilers in the region to derail or undermine peace negotiations. This is not only about preventing potential outbreaks of violence and terrorist attacks that could threaten negotiations, but also about denying extremists forces the ability to dictate the public agenda and challenge the legitimacy of a peace agreement throughout the Muslim and Arab world. For pragmatic Palestinian leaders to attain the legitimacy and support necessary to reach an agreement, they will need to know that they will not be accused of betrayal by the Arab world. They will also need to be able to portray the aspirations of radical forces as fanciful and as effectively detrimental to Palestinian national interests.

3. PROPOSALS FOR A UK ROLE

While extremist elements that are opposed to reconciliation are unlikely to disappear from the region, it is critical for the success of the negotiating effort that their capacity to inflict harm be diminished. Were the international community to engage groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas at this stage, it would essentially undercut pragmatic forces in the region that are committed to non-violence and willing to explore a peaceful settlement. In due course, it may become necessary to consider how to ensure that elements from more extremists forces accept the reality that a peace agreement seeks to create. But to do so it is first necessary to create sufficient and sustainable momentum in the direction of peace to which such forces could be encouraged to adapt.

Many of the measures that could further this goal need to come from the regional states themselves. But at the same time, the UK, both through its engagement with these countries, and through its own steps, can make a useful contribution. The measures to be considered here include:

- First and foremost, unwavering efforts to deny Iran nuclear weapons capacity and constrain its role as the leading state supporter of terrorism in the region.
- Constant efforts to limit the smuggling of weapons to groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah.
- Denying international legitimacy and standing to extremists groups which they would exploit to undercut the position of pragmatic actors seeking peace.
- Encouraging Arab states to make clear that they support the negotiations and would endorse any deal signed by the Palestinian leadership that is also acceptable to the Palestinian people.
- Maintaining support for, and legitimacy for, the two-state framework, while denying support to initiatives that run counter to this approach.
- Incentivising Israel to take steps towards peace by encouraging gradual steps towards normalisation for relations between Israel and the Arab world as progress is made on the bilateral track.
- Intensifying efforts to ‘operationalise’ the Arab Peace Initiative by articulating in more detail what ‘normal relations’ between Israel and the Arab world would look like in the event of comprehensive peace.

ii. Providing material and political support to the Palestinian Authority

Regional support for President Abbas and Prime-Minister Fayyad’s state-building effort remains greatly deficient. For a variety of reasons, Arab states have, as a whole, been unwilling to become true partners and advocates of Palestinian state-building. They have left much of the burden of international assistance to the EU and the United States. Such regional support is critical not only because it is needed in practice, but because the perception in some circles that the Palestinian state-building project is a ‘Western’ project undermines its legitimacy.

There is concern in the Arab world that PA reform and institution building is a substitute for political progress on issues such as Jerusalem and refugees, and a sense that overtly supporting the PA means taking a position against Hamas. The international community,

3. PROPOSALS FOR A UK ROLE

Britain included, needs to invest far more effort in altering the regional calculus on this issue. The success of Palestinian state-building is a critical component in creating the kind of responsible and functioning neighbour that Israel will need, in order to be persuaded to make the necessary concessions for a conflict ending agreement. Moreover, successful PA institutions will contribute in the long term to Palestinian reconciliation on terms conducive to a two-state solution, as the benefits of Palestinian self-empowerment and responsible governance become clearer to the Palestinian people.

In any event, regional states cannot be allowed to maintain a position of advocating strongly for a peace agreement, without themselves making the contributions and taking the risks that would help make this happen. In its engagement with the Arab world and particularly with Gulf States, the UK should therefore encourage Arab leaders to:

- Increase their material support to the PA budget, and fulfil outstanding pledges.
- Invite President Abbas and Prime-Minister Fayyad to Arab capitals for high-level meetings that demonstrate political support, and conduct corresponding visits to Ramallah.
- Promote specific projects in the area of economic reform and institution building that demonstrate Arab investment and commitment to the state-building agenda (e.g. investments in infrastructure, telecommunications, housing etc.).

Regional support for President Abbas and Prime-Minister Fayyad's state-building effort remains greatly deficient.

iii. Reviving regional cooperation

If progress is achieved on the bilateral track, the opportunity may emerge to renew multilateral regional engagement between Israel and the wider Arab world on issues of common concern such as water, the environment, tourism, health and economic development.

Such an effort would need to take account of developments since the 1990s when the Madrid conference launched the multilateral track. In this context, less attention should be paid to major conferences and public gestures which may deter many regional states from participating, at least in the present political climate. It may be more effective to identify a set of projects in various fields around which consensus might be built, at first between Israel, the PA, Egypt and Jordan and then through invitations to other regional actors. The goal would be to have a results oriented process that begins to show the tangible benefits of regional engagement on issues that affect the lives of ordinary people.

For example, in the field of health, medical experts from the region could gather to share research on a particular problem that affects the region or Palestinian society in particular, or they could address issues of shared concern such as vaccinations or epidemics. In environment, a training facility for preventing pollution of water sources could be established that invited experts throughout the region to share technical expertise, or to develop a regional ecological code of conduct. In the area of water, in addition

3. PROPOSALS FOR A UK ROLE

to strengthening the present MEDRC facility (Middle East Desalination Research Center) in Oman, state of the art sewage treatment facilities could be built in PA areas as part of a joint regional effort.

Through careful coordination with stakeholders, the UK could potentially play a leading role in reviving this kind of regional activity, taking full advantage of its skills and its broad ties throughout the region. As noted above, it would begin by consulting with the US and with Israel, the PA, Egypt and Jordan in order to create an agreed action plan within parameters that could attract broader regional interest.

2. Inside out: civil society initiatives

Polling in Israeli and Palestinian society suggests consistent majority support for a two-state solution on both sides, but also contains some worrying indicators. Paradoxically, both majorities view themselves as minorities and doubt that a similar majority exists on the other side. More significantly, the belief that the kind of peace that the majority support could actually materialise is often questioned, and those willing to actively rally and advocate for a two-state agreement seem to lack the determination and the energy of its opponents.

While civil society initiatives are no substitute for decisive action on the political level, there is much to be done to create constituencies that would not only tolerate or support a two-state agreement, but would actively campaign for it. Three examples of initiatives Britain could embark upon are listed below.

i. Highlighting the benefits of peace

In both Israeli and Palestinian society, the costs and risks of an agreement are acutely felt but its benefits are uncertain and intangible to the leaders and publics on both sides. A compelling case for the dividends of peace, that is both realistic and relevant for ordinary Israelis and Palestinians, has yet to be made effectively. This is ultimately the responsibility of Israeli and Palestinian leaders but there are things that could be done on the civil society level with UK support that would help to convey why a negotiated two-state solution is more about advancing Israeli or Palestinian interests, than compromising them.

Some ideas along these lines include:

- A UK facilitated Israeli-Palestinian advertising campaign about how peace can work for you.
- A documentary film interviewing ordinary Israelis and Palestinians about how they imagine their lives would be different under a successful peace agreement. A project along these lines with young people was recently undertaken by the One Voice organisation.
- Convening a Middle East 2020 Task Force of regional experts, that could also involve governments, that seeks to imagine and articulate how the Middle East might look in the context of a reality established by Israeli-Palestinian peace.

3. PROPOSALS FOR A UK ROLE

ii. Facilitating peace orientated education

Much attention has rightly been paid to the issue of incitement, with some moderate progress. Less focus, however, has been given to the flip-side of incitement, namely positive education towards tolerance and coexistence. While incitement is controversial and invites friction and trading blame, an attempt to develop a joint Israeli and Palestinian teaching programme about the concerns and the legitimacy of the other may be able to gain some traction.

This initiative would propose that the UK bring together Israeli and Palestinian educational experts in an effort to jointly review both Israeli and Palestinian textbooks in order to improve the way the values of reconciliation and coexistence are taught in schools. Ideally, this initiative would be advanced through official channels. However, there may also be room for progress within a less formal context that sought to encourage Israeli and Palestinian educators to get to know each other better and begin a conversation about what might be possible in the field of peace education.

an attempt to develop a joint Israeli and Palestinian teaching programme about the concerns and the legitimacy of the other may be able to gain some traction.

iii. Establishing a coexistence fund

The idea here would be to establish a funding body comprised of the UK, Israel and the PA that would decide by consensus to provide financial support to initiatives that promoted reconciliation, coexistence and a two-state solution. For example, schools that sought funding for educational projects that advanced these goals would have a clear address to approach for financial backing that came with joint Israeli-Palestinian approval. NGO's and other civil society groups could be encouraged to tailor their projects for maximum effect in order to be eligible for funding. The funding body itself could agree on initiatives it would proactively seek to advance.

The UK has some useful experience in this area from the Northern Ireland peace process that would lend credibility to the effort, and could act as the manager and primary collector of funds on behalf of the funding body.

3. Top down: facilitating political agreement

As mentioned above, third party involvement in the political negotiating process is the most controversial and potentially problematic form of engagement, though one to which many states attach significance. More often than not, such engagement, especially when unsolicited, complicates the negotiating effort and produces anxiety and rigidity in one party or the other. Engagement in the top down process must be conducted with particular sensitivity.

3. PROPOSALS FOR A UK ROLE

i. Discreet post agreement planning

One potential area for top down involvement relates to discreet efforts to plan for an international contribution to the implementation of a future peace agreement. Because of the sensitivity and complexity of the issues, it would be necessary to keep such an effort quiet. It would also be necessary to avoid becoming over-invested in an approach that may not in the end be reflected in an eventual agreement. Because deference to the parties' own negotiating process is paramount here, it is best to focus on areas that are either already effectively agreed or will inevitably need to be agreed, rather than presuming a solution on an issue that remains in dispute.

To take one example, in any agreement it is likely that Palestinian refugees will be offered an option to resettle in consenting third states. It may thus be possible for careful and confidential consultations to consider, from the perspective of third states, the number of refugees they may be able to absorb and the procedure they would envisage for doing so. Similarly, desired international economic arrangements with a future Palestinian state could be sketched out, though some of the details would necessarily be subject to the terms of a future peace agreement. Another possible area of work is to examine possibilities in consultation with the parties for maximising political endorsement of the agreement internationally. This might include developing ideas for a regional approach to issues such as water and the environment that could complement and bolster a bilateral agreement.

The UK is already doing important work in advancing Palestinian state-building.

4. Bottom up: state-building

The UK is already doing important work in advancing Palestinian state-building. This includes through supporting the US Security Coordinator in training the Palestinian Security Force and through EUPOL-COPPS, the EU led project to develop Palestinian policing capacity. This is in addition to the work of Tony Blair as Quartet Envoy. It is important that this continue. But in the context of preparing for functioning and responsible Palestinian statehood as part of the two-state vision, much more is possible. Three ideas for UK involvement are mentioned by way of example.

i. Rehabilitating refugee camps and poor areas in Palestinian territory

However the refugee issue is resolved, there will be a need to rehabilitate refugee camps and other poorer areas in the territory of a future Palestinian state. Residents will need improved housing and better access to basic resources, vocational training and economic opportunities in order to help an emerging Palestinian sovereign state to stabilise and prosper. This is especially the case as UNWRA's responsibilities are likely to be taken up, sooner or later, by the state itself.

3. PROPOSALS FOR A UK ROLE

The sensitive nature of the refugee issue has often meant that from an Arab and Palestinian perspective, improving the situation in the camps was somehow seen as an implicit waiver of the claimed 'right of return'. While this perspective still has traction in refugee camps in Arab host countries, it may have less resonance in Palestinian territory. Within the West Bank, the state building effort is underway and there is little doubt that, whatever the negotiated outcome, a sizeable refugee population will need to be better integrated into Palestinian society. If a serious initiative were adopted to improve conditions in the camps, without prejudice to the negotiations on the refugee issue, and in combination with similar efforts in other poor West Bank areas, it may be possible that both Israel and the PA could politically support and cooperate on the endeavour.

ii. Adopting a specific development project

Rather than engaging the parties in general terms on the importance of capacity building and reform, the UK might be able to adopt some specific state-building project as its own. This would not only create buy-in for the UK, and possibly improve its standing, but enable it to shepherd a specific initiative from planning to implementation and help overcome a variety of bureaucratic and other obstacles that often prevent efficient progress.

Selecting the right initiative would involve consultations with the parties and the Quartet Envoy, as well as a careful identification of where Britain could most make a useful contribution. One area that may be useful relates to urban planning. The UK already provides some support in this area but it may be possible to significantly expand assistance to the PA Ministry of Local Government and the Ministry of Planning to help develop the PA's West Bank land use plan effectively.

Possible other areas to explore could include improving the banking sector (especially with respect to loans and mortgages), healthcare, social welfare or the advancement of a major infrastructure project.

iii. Seconding British expertise to the PA

An additional initiative that would not involve a specific project would be to second UK experts in different fields to existing Palestinian ministries and institutions. UK professionals could potentially contribute in fields as diverse as town planning, accounting, public health management, traffic management, prison services, securities exchange, transportation, licensing and taxation.

This could also involve assistance by the Department for International Development (DfID) more generally in the field of development planning and policy. Successful development requires matching goals and resources. DfID could use its expertise in this area to assist the PA in determining what targets are necessary and feasible in the current context, taking into account external constraints.

4. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The initial ideas presented here would need to be developed considerably, in consultation with the parties, in order to be feasible, meaningful and effective. Broadly speaking, they reflect an approach to international involvement which operates in the space between what is possible and what is necessary. Bearing in mind the guidelines of international involvement mentioned above, Britain should seek to contribute in a way that plays to its strengths but acknowledges both its own limitations and the complexity of the environment in which the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is being undertaken.

By defending its reputation as a competent, balanced and focused actor in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, Britain can advance its own interests and international standing while helping the parties advance towards a lasting, peaceful settlement. In the end, of course, much will depend on the courage and wisdom of the people of the region, and their leaders, to take the right decisions for peace. But the international community, including the United Kingdom, has both the responsibility and the opportunity to act in a variety of spheres in order to create an environment that will make taking those decisions much easier.

ABOUT BICOM

BICOM is an independent British organisation dedicated to creating a more supportive environment for Israel in Britain. We do this by trying to create a more complete understanding of Israel and its situation. We believe in the right of the State of Israel to live in peace and security, just as we believe in the rights of the Palestinians to statehood. We support a close relationship between Britain and Israel, based on shared values and interests. BICOM pursues its objectives through a range of activities:

- Providing daily, expert news summary and analysis of events in Israel and the region through our online publications.
- Taking British journalists, opinion formers and policy makers to Israel and the Palestinian territories to learn about the issues first-hand.
- Bringing analysts, journalists and politicians from the region to Britain, to share their insights on the region with their British counterparts.
- Promoting a balanced discourse about Israel in the British media by creating opportunities for a wide range of voices to be heard.
- Organising events and seminars in the UK aimed at deepening the discussion about Israel in Britain.
- Engaging in dialogue with British opinion formers, policy makers and the media on issues of importance to Israel and the Britain-Israel relationship.
- Providing resources to individuals and organisations in Britain who share BICOM's agenda to promote a better understanding of Israel.

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