

## Middle East Priorities For Jan. 21

Contributed by Brent Scowcroft and Zbigniew Brzezinski  
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The election of Barack Obama to be the 44th president is profoundly historic. We have at long last been able to come together in a way that has eluded us in the long history of our great country. We should celebrate this triumph of the true spirit of America.

Election Day celebrations were replicated in time zones around the world, something we have not seen in a long time. While euphoria is ephemeral, we must endeavor to use its energy to bring us all together as Americans to cope with the urgent problems that beset us.

When Obama takes office in two months, he will find a number of difficult foreign policy issues competing for his attention, each with strong advocates among his advisers. We believe that the Arab-Israeli peace process is one issue that requires priority attention.

In perhaps no other region was the election of Obama more favorably received than the Middle East. Immediate attention to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute would help cement the goodwill that Obama's election engendered. Not everyone in the Middle East views the Palestinian issue as the greatest regional challenge, but the deep sense of injustice it stimulates is genuine and pervasive.

Unfortunately, the current administration's intense efforts over the past year will not resolve the issue by Jan. 20. But to let attention lapse would reinforce the feelings of injustice and neglect in the region. That could spur another eruption of violence between the warring parties or in places such as Lebanon or Gaza, reversing what progress has been made and sending the parties back to square one. Lurking in the background is the possibility that the quest for a two-state solution may be abandoned by the Palestinians, the Israelis, or both -- with unfortunate consequences for all.

Resolution of the Palestinian issue would have a positive impact on the region. It would liberate Arab governments to support U.S. leadership in dealing with regional problems, as they did before the Iraq invasion. It would dissipate much of the appeal of Hezbollah and Hamas, dependent as it is on the Palestinians' plight. It would change the region's psychological climate, putting Iran back on the defensive and putting a stop to its swagger.

The major elements of an agreement are well known. A key element in any new initiative would be for the U.S. president to declare publicly what, in the view of this country, the basic parameters of a fair and enduring peace ought to be. These should contain four principal elements: 1967 borders, with minor, reciprocal and agreed-upon modifications; compensation in lieu of the right of return for Palestinian refugees; Jerusalem as real home to two capitals; and a nonmilitarized Palestinian state.

Something more might be needed to deal with Israeli security concerns about turning over territory to a Palestinian government incapable of securing Israel against terrorist activity. That could be dealt with by deploying an international peacekeeping force, such as one from NATO, which could not only replace Israeli security but train Palestinian troops to become effective.

To date, the weakness of the negotiating parties has limited their ability to come to an agreement by themselves. The elections in Israel scheduled for February are certainly a complicating factor, as is the deep split among Palestinians between Fatah and Hamas. But if the peace process begins to gain momentum, it is difficult to imagine that Hamas will want to be left out, and that same momentum would provide the Israeli people a unique chance to register their views on the future of their country.

This weakness can be overcome by the president speaking out clearly and forcefully about the fundamental principles of the peace process; he also must press the case with steady determination. That initiative should then be followed -- not preceded -- by the appointment of a high-level dignitary to pursue the process on the president's behalf, a process based on the enunciated presidential guidelines. Such a presidential initiative should instantly galvanize support, both domestic and international, and provide great encouragement to the Israeli and Palestinian peoples.

To say that achieving a successful resolution of this critical issue is a simple task would be to scoff at history. But in many ways the current situation is such that the opportunity for success has never been greater, or the costs of failure more severe.

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