
U.S. Diplomacy in the Middle East

By

John H. Kelly
Assistant Secretary of State for
Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs

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I am pleased to appear before the subcommittee today to discuss recent developments in the Middle East. I welcome the opportunity to begin what I hope will be a series of regular consultations on the region. Today, I will focus on the Arab-Israeli peace process, Iran and the Persian Gulf, and Lebanon.

ARAB-ISRAELI PEACE PROCESS

A longstanding interest of the United States in the Middle East is to assist in efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict through direct negotiations based on UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. This approach is based on key principles, including that of the exchange of territory for peace. For a settlement to be achieved and to be durable, Israel must enjoy security with defensible borders. A settlement must provide security and recognition for all states in the region, as well as providing for the legitimate political rights of the Palestinian people.

Principles alone, however, will not guarantee a settlement. We are embarked on a pragmatic approach, designed to end the current tragic cycle of confrontation and to get Israelis and Palestinians engaged in a practical process. An authoritative dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza could enable the parties to break down walls of mistrust, alter their risk assessments, and focus on ways to negotiate. Such a dialogue would also help to structure elections in order to launch a political process involving negotiations on interim arrangements and final status of the occupied territories. Progress on those fundamental issues would permit resolution of other differences that now separate Israel and other Arab states. Two factors now guide our thinking.

First, we see real opportunities resulting from changed thinking in the region. Israelis and Palestinians have begun to acknowledge the need to engage one another directly. Israel has put forward a constructive initiative, which for the first time addresses Palestinians as Israel's key negotiating partner. The PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization] has finally accepted UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 and Israel's right to exist. Egypt has gained readmission to the Arab League without compromising its peace with Israel. These events illustrate changes in thinking on all sides that are positive and worth pursuing.

Second, however, the parties continue to face significant obstacles that have blocked progress to peacemaking in the past. Gaps between positions on substantive issues are broad. Mutual suspicions between the parties have been heightened by violence, and leaders on both sides face divisions within their own communities. Under these circumstances, a high visibility initiative by an outside party cannot succeed. Similarly, premature focus on mechanisms like an

international conference will only distract the parties from the difficult decisions they must make to establish a lasting peace.

It is within this context that we support the Government of Israel's peace initiative. The Israeli election proposal is a serious effort that we endorse wholeheartedly. It holds great promise and is worth building upon. We should not allow ourselves to be distracted by positions that do not advance the peace process. The May 14 proposal adopted by the Government of Israel is a serious effort to engage the Palestinians directly in a political process. It acknowledges that the Palestinians have political rights and aspirations that must be satisfied. The initiative deserves a serious and positive response from the Palestinians and the Arab states.

Many questions still need to be addressed about how we get to elections, the elections themselves, and the relationship between elections and negotiations. These can and should be discussed in an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, designed to pave the way for elections and negotiations. Beginning a Palestinian-Israeli dialogue is the first priority.

Let me say a word here about the U.S. dialogue with the PLO. Our dialogue with the PLO is not an end in itself. It is a means to advance a practical and workable peace process. In both formal and informal meetings, we press the PLO to give practical meaning to its commitments of last December: its renunciation of terrorism and its recognition of the existence of Israel. We also are trying to moderate PLO positions on the peace process and create conditions under which the Israeli Government initiative can work. We are not trying to mediate between the PLO and Israel. We are seeking to determine whether the PLO is ready to act responsibly in the peace process.

I have no major breakthroughs to report, but rather the continued efforts of our diplomacy to move all sides toward negotiations. This is slow and painstaking work. It has many opponents in the region, who seek to perpetuate the conflict rather than resolve it. It is, nonetheless, the way to proceed in a process designed to promote our national interests and to protect the interests of our friends, both Israeli and Arab. There is a long way to go. I remain hopeful that we can build on what has been done and elicit a positive Arab and Palestinian response, so that elections can be held and negotiations can be launched.

IRAN

Elsewhere in the Middle East, Iran continues to command attention because of its size, location, and influence. It is too early to assess the impact of Khomeini's passing on Iran's internal politics. The leadership moved quickly in an outward display of unity to close ranks around Khomeini's successor, President Khamenei, but Khomeini's death leaves the future course of Iran unclear.

It is too early to tell whether Iran will move in a more positive direction. By that I mean whether Iran will end its support for international terrorism and adhere to the accepted norms of international behavior, and whether Iran will use its influence with those holding our hostages in Lebanon to help gain their safe, immediate, and unconditional release. We hope so, but obviously have no assurance it will. The burden of proof clearly is on Iran to show it is prepared to behave responsibly. Actions are required, not words.

We are following developments in Iran closely. We continue to believe it is in our and Iran's interests to resume normal relations. President Bush has reiterated this position, but up to now we have had no meaningful reply from Tehran.

Let me restate for the record our policy: We are ready to talk to authorized Iranian Government representatives without preconditions. However, any substantial improvement in

relations will require an end to Iranian support for terrorism and Iranian help in freeing our hostages.

THE PERSIAN GULF

The cease-fire in the Persian Gulf has been in effect now for close to one year. Although Iran and Iraq have not signed a peace treaty to end hostilities, we are pleased that the cease-fire continues to hold. We continue to support UN efforts to encourage the two former belligerents to negotiate seriously and to conclude a lasting settlement.

Since I have restated for the record our policy vis-a-vis Iran, let me do the same for our policy toward the rest of the gulf. The United States recognizes that the Persian Gulf is an area of vital strategic importance. President Bush and this Administration are committed to defend our vital interests in the area: the free passage of oil through the Strait of Hormuz and the security of friendly regional states. This commitment is as firm as the commitments of the Reagan and Carter Administrations. The Bush Administration is similarly determined to defend the principle of freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere.

If I may offer a personal observation, as one who was not directly involved in the formulation of our gulf policy, I think the reason our policy has succeeded over the years is that there has been a bipartisan consensus that the policy meet our vital national interests.

The security of our interests in the gulf rests on security cooperation with the member nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council, including arms sales. During our escort and other deterrent operations, we learned daily the importance of "interoperability" of military equipment. In a variety of ways, we found that common equipment, similar training, and like-minded planning greatly enhanced the cooperation and ultimate success of our efforts.

Among the states with which we enjoy this cooperation is Saudi Arabia. We will be pleased to welcome King Fahd on a state visit to the United States July 26-30 [postponed by the Saudi Government]. We intend to review these issues with him when he visits.

LEBANON

Moving on to Lebanon, let me begin by saying that the situation in Beirut remains extremely volatile. Both sides accepted, in principle, an Arab League call for a cease-fire. However, sea and land blockades continue. A crossing was opened in Beirut last week, but the sea blockade remains unresolved over the issue of arms shipments. These blockades have caused severe shortages of fuel and food, particularly in the Christian enclave of east Beirut.

The cease-fire remains unfulfilled. Shelling continues on a daily basis. The United States strongly urges an end to the involvement of foreign forces and restraint in the shipment of arms from foreign sources.

On June 14, the President met with Prince Saud al-Faisal, Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, to discuss the efforts of the Arab League to resolve the Lebanon crisis. The President welcomed the collective efforts of the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Algeria. He expressed our support for their mandate to pursue, urgently, a political process in Lebanon that leads to elections, reforms, and a new national consensus.

The United States intends to do all it can to promote a political solution that will bring Lebanon's turmoil to an end. We believe a political dialogue among the Lebanese is essential for Lebanon to regain its stability and security. Such a dialogue is a necessary step toward resolution of Lebanon's suffering, which has gone on far too long. All parties to the conflict should show

restraint and flexibility at this crucial point. All concerned should promote a political process that is devoid of threats and coercion and that leads to national reconciliation and reform. The goal of all friends of Lebanon must be a reunited and sovereign country—free of foreign forces and armed militias—in which the Lebanese people live in harmony.

BALLISTIC MISSILES AND CHEMICAL WEAPONS

One further issue of serious concern to us in the Middle East and South Asia is the spread of ballistic missiles and chemical weapons. These weapons raise the threat of violence to a new order of magnitude in a region in which strong conventional military forces already exist and the potential for conflict is high.

Ballistic missiles with ranges of up to 2,500 kilometers (1,552 miles) are now entering the inventories of several states in the region. The presence of these weapons may encourage potential adversaries to launch preemptive attacks or to acquire similar weapons as a deterrent. This prospect becomes even more troubling when linked to the proliferation of chemical warfare agents. The need for concerted and energetic action has been dramatically illustrated by the use of chemical weapons by both parties in the Iran-Iraq war, by Iraq's use of chemical weapons against elements of its own population, and by Libya's attempts to acquire full-scale chemical weapons production capability. The Administration is at the forefront of such action, encouraging the coordination of export controls through the informal Missile Technology Control Regime, and pursuing efforts to contain chemical weapons proliferation.