



The New Address for Middle East Peace and Security  
5335 Wisconsin Avenue, Suite 440 | Washington, DC 20015  
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## MEMORANDUM

**Date:** December 19, 2008

**To:** President-elect Barack Obama and Vice President-elect Joe Biden's Foreign Policy and National Security Transition Team

**From:** Jeremy Ben-Ami, Executive Director, J Street

**Re:** U.S. Engagement in Middle East Diplomacy from Day One

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J Street applauds the stated agenda of President-elect Obama and Vice President-elect Joe Biden for a comprehensive American re-engagement in the Arab-Israeli conflict and unconditional US-Iranian talks to ensure, among other things, a nuclear weapons-free Iran.<sup>1</sup>

A broad coalition of organizations and experts agree that a comprehensive American re-engagement in the Arab-Israeli conflict is not only essential to the long-term security of Israel, but is also necessary for the re-stabilization of the entire region and, therefore, in America's best interests.

By actively pursuing Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian peace, while engaging in direct talks to ensure a nuclear weapons-free Iran, America can leverage its restored credibility to address the urgent need for a sustainable and peaceful solution to the region's conflicts.

### **1. The Opportunity**

The new administration will be welcomed with a great degree of goodwill internationally, and particularly in the Middle East. There will be a new willingness in many quarters to hear America out and to consider enhanced cooperation and joint problem solving.

Few things will define the new administration in the eyes of the Arab and Muslim worlds more than the question of whether it is meaningfully engaged in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And that applies to Israel, too. Israel's security was a net loser during the years when America neglected peacemaking and embraced ill-conceived military adventures in Israel's neighborhood.

So we have a precious new opportunity. And with opportunity comes expectations. The corresponding cost of not making this a priority will be that much greater.

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<sup>1</sup> "Agenda: Foreign Policy. *Change.Gov*. Accessed December 18, 2008.



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## **2. The Necessity**

The status quo of an ongoing, entrenched, and frequently deteriorating Israeli-Arab conflict carries with it powerful costs and consequences for the United States of America. The conflict, and grievance narrative that is its bedfellow, have a deeply corrosive effect on both America's standing and its ability to get things done in the region and beyond. Resolving the conflict will not be a panacea out of which a Garden of Eden will emerge throughout the region, but it is an essential piece of the jigsaw puzzle in constructing a more predictable, stable, and secure Middle East - and that is a core American national security interest.

The unresolved conflict fuels anti-Americanism, undermines America's allies, is a recruitment tool driving extremism, saps American credibility, and is a political and PR gift to Iran. And the situation is prone to both deterioration and to sucking America in.

The various Middle East crises in which America is so intertwined all feed off one another, and feed into each other. And the Arab-Israeli conflict has a spillover effect whether one is dealing with the Iran file, gaining the cooperation of Iraq's neighbors, internal stability in Lebanon, or the general pushback against al-Qaeda's radicalizing message. As the bipartisan Iraq Study Group clearly reported in December 2006: "The United States cannot achieve its goals in the Middle East unless it deals directly with the Arab-Israeli conflict and regional instability. There must be a renewed and sustained commitment by the United States to a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace on all fronts: Lebanon, Syria, and President Bush's 2002 commitment to a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine."<sup>2</sup>

## **3. The Urgency**

After seven years of disastrous American policy in the region that consistently placed the conflict at the bottom of the pile, America and Israel's options are not improving as time marches on. Given what we are hearing from the region<sup>3</sup> and from the experts<sup>4</sup> – including from the Council on Foreign Relations and the Brookings Institution's latest

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<sup>2</sup> "The Iraq Study Group Report," *United States Institute of Peace*. December 2006.

<sup>3</sup> "A Middle East Blueprint for the First 100 Days of the Obama Administration." *Americans for Peace Now*. December 2008.

<sup>4</sup> "Middle East Priorities For Jan. 21," by Brent Scowcroft and Zbigniew Brzezinski. *The Washington Post*. November 21, 2008.



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report on American Foreign Policy in the Middle East<sup>5</sup> - it would not be excessively alarmist to claim that the window is closing on the possibility of a two-state solution and that option may not exist beyond the next administration.

That will have devastating consequences for the future prospects of America's ally Israel. Realizing the two-state solution has become an existential Israeli need - the only way to ensure an Israel that is both Jewish and Democratic. In the words of outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, "If the day comes when the two-state solution collapses...the state of Israel is finished."<sup>6</sup> The vibrant center of Israeli politics wants to preserve an Israel with a Jewish majority and a democratic character, and appreciates the need to withdraw from Palestinian territories, and to allow the creation of a Palestinian state in order to ensure this. It also needs help. Help from its American friends. And urgently.

For the Palestinians, playing the time and demographic cards is also no picnic. It condemns them to future generations of suffering and the postponement of their own liberty, independence, and sovereignty. Yet this is the direction we are all inexorably moving in.

And for America, this carries a particularly heavy responsibility. The American-Israeli strategic alliance—a profound and historic relationship—will find itself facing no good options for charting Israel's future, acceptance, and normalization in the region if we do not act now.

#### **4. It Can Be Done**

We recognize that even if the case for Arab-Israeli peace-making being a priority is a compelling one, it still needs to be coupled with a practical and realistic vision for achieving that goal. We believe such a path exists. The majority of Israelis and Palestinians consistently express support for a realistic two-state plan in ongoing polling. Israel and Syria have resumed peace talks, albeit Turkish-mediated proximity talks without, thus far, American support. The Saudi / Arab Peace Initiative holds out the prospect of a comprehensive peace between Israel and the Arab world, with the promise of recognition, normal relations, and security. The ingredients exist. The chef has been missing.

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<sup>5</sup> "Restoring the Balance: A Middle East Strategy for the Next President. Chapter 5." by Steven A. Cook and Shibley Telhami. *Brookings Institution Press*. 2008.

<sup>6</sup> "Olmert to Haaretz: Two-state solution, or Israel is done for," by Aluf Benn, David Landau, Barak Ravid, Shmuel Rosner, Haaretz Correspondents and AP. *Haaretz*. November 29, 2007.



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American leadership, a willingness to make a concerted, assertive, and determined effort to achieve comprehensive peace is vital and even game changing. It will not be easy but it can be done.<sup>7</sup> There is an opportunity, a necessity, and an urgency.

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<sup>7</sup> "Pursuing Peace Amid Pessimism," by Daniel Levy. *The Forward*. December 18, 2008.