

A Face-to-Face Solution To the Mideast Problem

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The situation in the Arab world is now as fragile as ever. Popular street protests are overthrowing regimes. Yet, somehow, it always comes back to Israel and the Palestinians, who are considered the root of regional instability.

It is widely believed that if Israel only withdrew its forces and settlements from the West Bank, there would be everlasting peace, the Iranian nuclear threat to the region and the world would disappear, and radical Islamism would cease to exist. Last week, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Moscow, where both expressed a willingness to return to the negotiation table.

During the past week, Israel's southern districts have been suffering from continued massive mortar, rocket and missile shelling from the Gaza Strip, ruled by Hamas. Last Wednesday, after nearly seven years of relative calm, there was a serious terrorist attack in central Jerusalem. Two weeks ago, an Israeli family, including babies, was slaughtered in its home

in Itamar, a settlement in the West Bank.

Yet most Israelis understand the necessity of face-to-face negotiations to achieve peace and a viable Palestinian state. Netanyahu, as his predecessors, has made a real effort to bring Abbas to negotiations, even though Abbas effectively controls only the West Bank, not the Gaza Strip.

Instead of boldly beginning direct negotiations, Abbas has set preconditions such as demanding a total building freeze in all of the West Bank and East Jerusalem and the recognition of the June 1967 borders.

Now there is a new idea. The Palestinian leadership has launched a campaign to do an end-run around Israel by seeking international support for a possible unilateral declaration of statehood. Last week, former Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erekat made it public that the Palestinian Authority would ask the United Nations for unilateral recognition of statehood — a move that would contradict the principles stated by the international Quartet, of which Russia is a member.

Russia has always reiterated its firm commitment to the Quartet's principles and urged the sides not to resort to unilateral steps. But the Palestinians want to do exactly the opposite, while Israel seeks to return to negotiations despite terrorist attacks. The mere Israeli desire to negotiate underlines that the country wants peace. If Palestinians want the same, why do they avoid face-to-face negotiations?

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