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This Is Not a Test

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN
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Stop me if you've heard this one before. "Guy walks into a bar ..." No, not that one — this one: "This is *the* most critical year ever for Palestinian-Israeli diplomacy. It is five minutes to midnight. If we don't get diplomacy back on track soon, it will be the end of the two-state solution."



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times
Thomas L. Friedman

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despite promises to the U.S. to do so, so it's getting hard to see how the "legal" settlements will ever be removed. What is needed from Israel's Feb. 10 elections is a centrist, national unity government that can resist the blackmail of the settlers, and the rightist parties that protect them, to still implement a two-state solution.

Because without a stable two-state solution, what you will have is an Israel hiding behind a high wall, defending itself from a Hamas-run failed state in Gaza, a Hezbollah-

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I've heard that line almost every year for the last 20, and I've never bought it. Well, today, I'm buying it.

We're getting perilously close to closing the window on a two-state solution, because the two chief window-closers — Hamas in Gaza and the fanatical Jewish settlers in the West Bank — have been in the driver's seats. Hamas is busy making a two-state solution inconceivable, while the settlers have steadily worked to make it impossible.

If Hamas continues to obtain and use longer- and longer-range rockets, there is no way any Israeli government can or will tolerate independent Palestinian control of the West Bank, because a rocket from there can easily close the Tel Aviv airport and shut down Israel's economy.

And if the Jewish settlers continue with their "natural growth" to devour the West Bank, it will also be effectively off the table. No Israeli government has mustered the will to take down even the "illegal," unauthorized settlements,

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run failed state in south Lebanon and a Fatah-run failed state in Ramallah. Have a nice day.

So if you believe in the necessity of a Palestinian state or you love Israel, you'd better start paying attention. This is not a test. We're at a hinge of history.

What makes it so challenging for the new Obama team is that Mideast diplomacy has been transformed as a result of the regional disintegration since Oslo — in three key ways.

First, in the old days, Henry Kissinger could fly to three capitals, meet three kings, presidents or prime ministers and strike a deal that could hold. No more. Today a peacemaker has to be both a nation-builder and a negotiator.

The Palestinians are so fragmented politically and geographically that half of U.S. diplomacy is going to be about how to make peace between Palestinians, and build their institutions, so there is a coherent, legitimate decision-making body there — before we can make peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

Second, Hamas now has a veto over any Palestinian peace deal. It's true that Hamas just provoked a reckless war that has devastated the people of Gaza. But Hamas is not going away. It is well armed and, despite its suicidal behavior of late, deeply rooted.

The Palestinian Authority led by Mahmoud Abbas in the West Bank will not make any compromise deal with Israel as long as it fears that Hamas, from outside the tent, would denounce it as traitorous. Therefore, Job 2 for the U.S., Israel and the Arab states is to find a way to bring Hamas into a Palestinian national unity government.

As the Middle East expert Stephen P. Cohen says, "It is not enough for Israel that the world recognize that Hamas criminally mismanaged its responsibility to its people. Israel's longer-term interest is to be sure that it has a Palestinian partner for negotiations, which will have sufficient legitimacy among its own people to be able to sign agreements and fulfill them. Without Hamas as part of a Palestinian decision, any Israeli-Palestinian peace will be meaningless."

But bringing Hamas into a Palestinian unity government, without undermining the West Bank moderates now leading the Palestinian Authority, will be tricky. We'll need Saudi Arabia and Egypt to buy, cajole and pressure Hamas into keeping the cease-fire, supporting peace talks and to give up rockets — while Iran and Syria will be tugging Hamas the other way.

And that leads to the third new factor — Iran as a key player in Palestinian-Israeli diplomacy. The Clinton team tried to woo Syria while isolating Iran. President Bush tried to isolate both Iran and Syria. The Obama team, as Martin Indyk argues in "Innocent Abroad: An Intimate Account of American Peace Diplomacy in the Middle East," "needs to try both to bring in Syria, which would weaken Hamas and Hezbollah, while also engaging Iran."

So, just to recap: It's five to midnight and before the clock strikes 12 all we need to do is rebuild Fatah, merge it with Hamas, elect an Israeli government that can freeze settlements, court Syria and engage Iran — while preventing it from going nuclear — just so we can get the parties to start talking. Whoever lines up all the pieces of this diplomatic Rubik's Cube deserves two Nobel Prizes.

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