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Trends in U.S. Foreign Policy

# A Look at the Brookings Report

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Well-informed observers who seek clues to the unfolding of Administration thinking have been carefully examining a 26-page and somewhat obscure report, *Toward Peace in the Middle East*, published in December 1975 by a special study group organized under the auspices of the Brookings Institution. The group consisted of 16 lawyers, educators, and businessmen, all of them with some expertise or special interest in the Middle East. Care was taken to ensure that the group consisted of some people who were pro-Arab, some who were pro-Israel and some who were not identified with either side. Many in the group had national or international reputations. The report derives its greatest significance from the fact that two of its members now occupy key posts in the Carter Administration. These are Zbigniew Brzezinski, the President's adviser on national security affairs, and William Quandt, who is in charge of the Middle East desk of the National Security Council staff. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the President is being advised along the lines indicated in the Report.

The Brookings Report contains little that is new, but it clearly and concisely outlines the major elements of a final and comprehensive settlement based on principles that the participants believe the parties to the dispute could and would accept. Its major innovation is the concept of stages of implementation of the agreement, a process that could last for many years, perhaps decades. The hope is that such a delay would allow time for all wounds to heal and for the causes of the conflict to wither away. Judging from his statements during his first few months in office, it is quite clear that President Carter has been heavily influenced by the Report's

reasoning and that he has adopted it in essence as his Middle East policy—or at least as a viable proposal that can be put to the Arabs and the Israelis.

### The Report's Basic Principles

The Report is predicated on the belief that the consequences of further war in the area would be so serious that the United States must make an active and concerted effort to bring about a settlement. A second assumption is that further step-by-step negotiations are not likely to prove fruitful. Therefore, efforts should be directed toward a comprehensive settlement, without which the danger of war would be very great. The members of the group were convinced that the propitious time had come to act, not least because the "Arab states bordering Israel have all publicly recognized its existence and indicated a willingness, under very specific conditions, to negotiate a permanent settlement" (p. 7).

Thus the entire report rests on the acceptance of the notion that the Arabs genuinely recognize Israel's existence, after 29 years of stubborn refusal to do so, along with a corresponding belief that Israel is now willing to trade territory for the genuine peace that the Arabs will contract.

But if either of these two conditions is not met, the kind of settlement envisioned by the Brookings group becomes impossible. A skeptical Israeli might ask the group how the Arab states can simultaneously recognize both Israel and the PLO—an organization that lays claim to Israel's territory and that is officially and ideologically committed to Israel's destruction. This is the nub of the problem. If Israel is going to be persuaded that it can afford to withdraw from territories now occupied by virtue of the 1967 war, the Israelis must also be firmly convinced that the Arabs have, in fact, given up their oft-proclaimed hope of eradicating their country. If

they are not so convinced, the process, no matter how long it takes, makes no sense. Only if there is a reasonable hope that genuine peace will come and *can be maintained* after many years of trading pieces of land for pieces of peace can acceptance of the package be justified.

The basic recommendation of the Brookings group is that Israel withdraw to the pre-1967 boundaries "with only such modifications as might be mutually accepted" (p. 12), in exchange for "binding commitments by the Arab states to a stable peace" (p. 4), accompanied by "normal international and regional political and economic relations" (p. 2). The achievement of these reciprocal goals would progress through defined stages over a period of many years, with each party retaining the right to suspend its own schedule if the other side fails to uphold a part of the bargain. The Report contains three other elements of a settlement: 1) self-determination for the Palestinians if they recognize Israel's sovereignty and territorial integrity; 2) the notion of peace as outlined in the Report; 3) international guarantees and principles to ensure free access to and circulation within Jerusalem.\*

In a sense, the Report is simply another formulation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 242: it involves a trade-off of peace and security for territory. However, it improves significantly on the U.N. formula by introducing the concept of staged implementation—a recognition of the suspicions and insecurities that abound in the Middle East. This is a welcome step forward but, on the other hand, the report also glosses over some formidable obstacles.

The first is that the concessions are imbalanced: normalization of relations can always be reversed, but return of territory cannot. This is an inherent flaw in the report and a serious one. In order to compensate for the imbalance in the concessions to be made, the Arabs have to demonstrate in advance of formal agreement that there have been fundamental and far-reaching changes

\*The group could not, apparently, agree on a recommendation regarding the political status of Jerusalem.

## Brookings Report (cont'd.)

in their attitudes toward Israel and toward the legitimacy of its existence as a Jewish state in the Middle East. The more doubts the Arabs raise by their actions, the more difficult it is for Israel to believe that things have really changed. In 1975, even as the Brookings group was preparing its Report, the Arabs were forcing the infamous "Zionism as racism" resolution through the U.N. The intensity of these anti-Israel political activities has not been reduced subsequently. The 1976 Habitat Conference in Vancouver was used as a forum to attack Israel. At the U.N., two General Assembly resolutions that relate to the "Zionism as racism" resolution have been passed. Renewed action against Israel was taken at the recent WHO Assembly at Geneva on the pretext of concern for the health conditions of the Arab population of the West Bank. In 1974, the ILO was pressured to initiate investigation of the situation of workers in the occupied territories (dropped by the ILO's Executive Council in March 1977). The scene was given further emphasis earlier this year in the Cairo Declaration of the Afro-Arab Summit meeting. In the diplomatic sphere, at least one Arab country has broken relations with Portugal because it upgraded its relationship with Israel. And the Spanish king was dissuaded from meeting with the World Jewish Congress leadership by severe pressure from the Arab states. But the continuing fundamental hostility to Israel is best illustrated by the unchanged PLO position after its National Council meeting in March, and President Sadat's continuing reluctance to even contemplate a genuine peace, as evidenced by his statements in Washington this April, such as that peace was not for this generation, etc.

Another problem is the Israelis' need to think through their position on territories before negotiations can be productive. In 1967 the Israelis genuinely saw the territories as a bargaining chip.

Apart from national and historic attachments, the ten-year stalemate has given Israel an appreciation of the security value of these territories. The Arabs have never been willing to contemplate an Israeli annexation of any portion of these territories as part of a settlement. The United States is not likely to countenance major permanent additions to Israel, although it may be sympathetic to certain adjustments for security reasons. Hence both parties to the conflict must make some reassessments of their own positions before serious negotiations can begin.

Of all the many problems, the Palestinian problem is the most complex. The PLO's Palestine National Council meeting in March emphatically conveyed the message that the PLO's objective has not changed. Statements by various PLO spokesmen over the years have been unambiguously hostile to the idea of Israel as a permanent presence in the Middle East. The PLO's suitability as a participant in a settlement must therefore be questioned. In addition, the Report is too quick to accept a distinction between the Palestinians and the Jordanians—and this gives rise to their concept of a separate Palestinian state on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Many Israelis have pointed out that a separate Palestinian state would not solve the Palestinian problem; it would only exacerbate it and almost guarantee irredentism. It must be pointed out that the standard formula of creating a Palestinian state on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip is in fact an open invitation to conflict. Dividing territory in this volatile area does not make for a promising arrangement.

It is to the credit of the Brookings group that they *did* recommend a Jordanian federation as an alternative. They also correctly raised the question of whether the PLO can in fact represent the Palestinian Arabs, most of whom already live in what was British Mandatory Palestine, while the PLO

draws its strength from the refugee camps in Lebanon and elsewhere. It is true that some form of Palestinian co-operation and participation is essential for a successful settlement, but the problem is that this may not be politically achievable. The PLO cannot accept the concept of peace with Israel—and acceptance of Israel is a cornerstone of the Brookings approach—while it can prevent moderate Palestinian representatives from participating in peace talks.

Although the Jerusalem problem proved to be too much for the Brookings group to tackle, the Report's criteria for any solution are nevertheless useful in stimulating further thinking. Beyond that, it seems reasonable to believe that if everything else can be worked out, a solution to the Jerusalem issue will also become possible.

If Israel really is prepared to withdraw, and if the Arabs really do want peace, the Brookings Report would be a useful contribution that points the way—despite its undertone that a settlement may have to be imposed if nothing else works. Many of the Report's suggested elements of a settlement require careful examination, such as the nature of international and unilateral guarantees, of which the Israelis are justifiably suspicious, and the form that Palestinian self-determination would take.

The most serious obstacle remains Israeli suspicion that the present call for negotiations for a settlement is really part of a subtle, long-range Arab strategy and that this strategy is still aimed at the elimination of Israel. Such fears must be allayed if Israel is to take the risks inherent in territorial concessions. They cannot be allayed unless there is a fundamental change in attitudes within the Arab world.

If there is some evidence that such a change may have begun, it is not conclusive. In fact there continues to be much evidence that this change is still far off.

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