Israel's U.N. Ambassador: Direct Diplomacy is the Only Way to Peace

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By Danny Danon

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As President Obama and United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon prepare to leave office in the coming months, there are increasing calls for these world leaders to back a new Israeli-Palestinian peace initiative.

Some are planning an international summit; others call for a renewed focused on mediated peace talks. A number of policymakers and peace process experts also have proposed a U.N. Security Council resolution that would set parameters for a final agreement.

While Israel welcomes the good intentions of our friends, the truth is such initiatives are not enough. The modern history of Israeli-Arab peacemaking has taught us that only direct negotiations between the two sides can actually achieve results.

The best-known international gathering on Israeli-Arab peace was the 1991 Madrid conference. It was an impressive event, co-sponsored by the U.S. and Russia, that brought together representatives from Israel, Syria and Lebanon as well as a joint Palestinian-Jordan delegation.

And yet little progress got made. The conference kicked off what was to be almost 20 years of unproductive on-again, off-again negotiations with the Syrians. Meanwhile, the Palestinian track that began in Madrid was short-lived and similarly made no progress toward peace. (It was separately that the controversial 1994 Oslo accords creating the Palestinian Authority were hammered out directly by representatives of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.)

The U.N. has been similarly unsuccessful in brokering peace. The most well-known Security Council action on the Arab-Israeli conflict is Resolution 242 from 1967. It called for ending the conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors by a “withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories” in return for every state in the region to be able “to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force.” Following Resolution 242, however, the Palestinian representatives never acknowledged the legitimacy of the nation of Israel. No serious U.N.-sponsored peace talks were ever initiated as a result of this resolution.

Third-party mediation also has been tried. Envoys including Swedish diplomat Gunnar Jarring and Americans William P. Rogers, Dennis Ross and George Mitchell gave it their best shot. They all suggested new strategies for moving forward, and many had good intentions, but none brought about a peace deal.

So what does work? Direct talks.

Israel's enduring peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan were the result of representatives — or even the leaders personally — coming together to negotiate without preconditions. Our collective memories may glorify the 1978 Camp David summit and the 1994 treaty-signing ceremony at the White House, but those events were the culmination of countless hours of direct negotiations.

The peace deal with Egypt began in 1977 with secret talks between Israel's minister of foreign affairs, Moshe Dayan, and Egypt's deputy prime minister, Hassan Tuhami, followed by detailed negotiations between Prime Minister Menachem Begin and President Anwar Sadat. In the case of Jordan, peace was finally reached in 1994 when King Hussein had the courage to sit down with Prime Minister Rabin and negotiate directly the tough issues that had kept our nations at war for 47 years.

Since his reelection in 2009, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has extended himself further than any previous Israeli leader in his pursuit of direct negotiations with the Palestinian Authority. He enacted a controversial construction freeze in Judea and Samaria and released dozens of convicted murderers, all in the hope of convincing Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to negotiate with him.

Abbas, however, continually tosses out new preconditions to agreeing merely to talk. He has met face to face with Netanyahu for only six hours since 2009. While Abbas recently hinted in a TV interview that he would be willing to meet the prime minister, he has spent the intervening weeks pushing forward a Security Council resolution to condemn us and jetting around Europe to garner support for international initiatives. All the while, his Palestinian Authority continues to pay stipends to the family members of terrorists and to incite further violence against Israel on its official TV channels. These are not the actions of someone who is serious about peace.

Our peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, which have weathered years of upheaval in the Middle East, have proved that bitter enemies can settle their differences if they sit down to talk. Direct negotiations cannot be replaced by international conferences, presidential speeches, or even U.N. Security Council resolutions.

Peace will come only when the Palestinians recognize the Jewish state as a legitimate partner for direct negotiations to resolve this conflict.