

Dick Lugar

U.S. Senator for Indiana

Date: 03/04/2010 • <http://lugar.senate.gov>
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Opening Statement for Hearing on Middle East Peace

U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Ranking Member Dick Lugar made the following statement at today's hearing.

I thank Chairman Kerry for convening this hearing, and I join him in welcoming our distinguished witnesses.

The United States continues to support a negotiated Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement that would address Israel's security concerns and satisfy Palestinian aspirations for statehood, while resolving the full range of final status issues. I have welcomed the Administration's efforts toward this end. On his second day in office, President Obama appointed our former colleague Senator George Mitchell as Special Envoy for Middle East Peace. I was pleased that Senator Mitchell was able to meet with Members of the Committee a few weeks ago to share his perspectives.

The task before Senator Mitchell is daunting. Peace talks were suspended in the aftermath of the fighting in Gaza, and the parties have been at an impasse over the demand for a settlement freeze. Rhetoric on both sides remains incendiary. Whether through proximity talks, or some other mechanism, we are searching for a way to move forward. The question is what can be done to build confidence and increase the likelihood of success?

New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman suggested in an editorial last November that the U.S. approach to the Middle East peace process had reached a point of inertia that is contributing to bad behavior by the parties. He proposed a dramatic shift in strategy, saying that the United States should end our participation in the peace process, publicly informing the parties that we will come back when they get serious. Friedman argues that by continuing active U.S. mediation efforts regardless of the behavior of both sides, "We relieve all the political pain from the Arab and Israeli decision-makers by creating the impression in the minds of their publics that something serious is happening." This allows Israeli and Palestinian leaders to associate themselves with the peace process without making any political sacrifices or tempering their ideological agendas.

I would not want to take the ball out of Senator Mitchell's hands at this time, but I share Tom Friedman's frustrations and believe that we should be thinking beyond conventional mediation strategies. I would be interested to hear our witnesses' views on the likely impact of the move suggested by Tom Friedman.

Meanwhile, Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salaam Fayyad has been working quietly to build governing institutions for the day when a Palestinian state is established. General Dayton, the U.S. Security Coordinator, and his international team have been helping to build the capacity of the Palestinian security forces and the Interior Ministry. Substantial progress has been made, and the program merits continued support. Other Ministries are making headway in becoming more accountable and transparent. But there is a limit to how much progress can be made absent results on the diplomatic front.

The Administration has not limited its ambitions to the "Palestinian track." It has articulated a vision for a comprehensive Middle East peace. I would appreciate hearing from our witnesses about how we can best capitalize on regional dynamics to advance this goal. To what extent has the common threat of a nuclear Iran influenced calculations on the part of key regional actors? The Administration has made overtures to Syria in recent weeks, including a visit to Damascus by Under Secretary William Burns and the nomination of a U.S. Ambassador to Syria, following a long hiatus. Nevertheless, the joint press conference last week by the Presidents of Iran and Syria produced provocative anti-American statements. What are the prospects in the coming few years for a meaningful advancement of the U.S.-Syrian dialogue or of Israeli-Syrian peace talks?

I look forward to hearing the assessments of our witnesses regarding the situation on the ground in the Middle East and their prescriptions for making progress toward the goal of a comprehensive peace.

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