George J. Mitchell "How we got here: The prospect of Israeli and Palestinian peace may seem more distant than ever. But a two-state solution is still the only path forward" [part 1 of 3]

Boston Globe, Sept. 7, 2014

Smoke and debris rose after an Israeli strike hit Gaza City in the northern Gaza Strip on Aug. 19.

The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians continues against a backdrop of resurgent violence elsewhere in the Middle East. Americans reacted with anger and horror to the recent grisly spectacle of the beheadings of two American journalists by the Islamic State, the Sunni extremist group that seeks to establish an Islamic caliphate in Syria and Iraq.

There also was confusion. ISIS got its start in opposition to the Syrian government of Bashar Assad, a government that the United States also opposes.

In trying to comprehend an area where rulers and boundaries for a long time came from elsewhere — and where religious, tribal, and family loyalties often trump national identity — confusion and anger are understandable.

Weary after more than a decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, many Americans want to turn away from what seems to be an intractable and unsolvable mess. Others want to do just the opposite — to unleash more American military power in an effort to quell the seeming chaos.

Conflicts in the Middle East are many and overlapping: Arabs and Jews; Israelis and Palestinians; Persians and Arabs; Sunni and Shiite Muslims; fundamentalists and moderates; Sunni-led governments and Sunni opposition groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood. In this highly complex and volatile region, what should the United States do? What can we do?

The reality, of course, is that the United States' ability to control events in the world is limited. But though we may not be able to fully control events, we do have unequalled power to influence them.

All of the conflicts of the Middle East are products of history. We cannot change that history. But we may be able to alter its future course. It is in our national interest to help resolve conflicts and reduce instability in the Middle East to the extent possible, especially where we can do so by means other than military force. Nonetheless, we also must be prepared to use force when necessary and appropriate.

In particular, we should continue the active pursuit of an agreement to end the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. While there are many reasons to be pessimistic in the wake of the latest flare-up of violence in Gaza, successful peace negotiations could end the suffering of those war-weary peoples. It could dramatically improve America's credibility in the region and could make it possible for Israel and the Sunni-dominated monarchies to work together to combat their common foe, and ours: the extremist forces now menacing the entire region.

Any such peace effort requires understanding how the conflict started. I begin not in the Middle East itself but in London and Paris, where decisions made a century ago reverberate today.

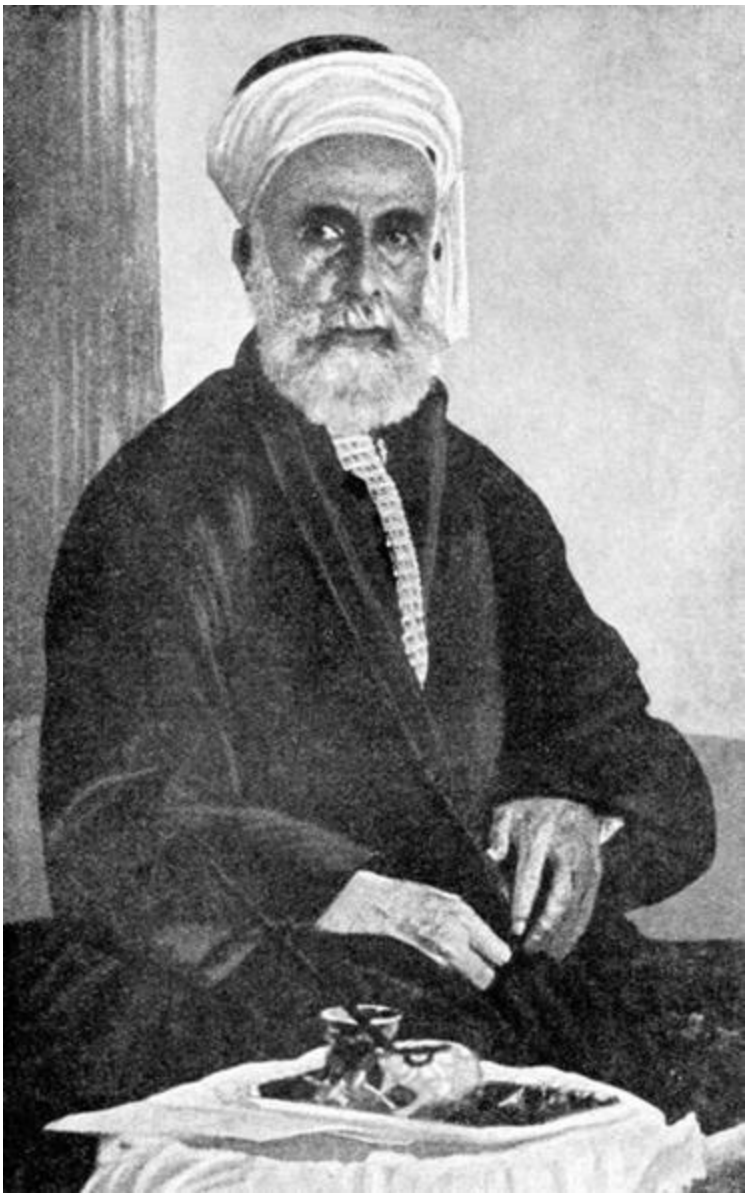
George Mitchell (right), then the US special envoy to the Middle East, met with Israeli and Palestinian leaders for peace talks in Egypt. Pictured (from left): Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

Planting the seeds of conflict

After Britain and France suffered huge losses in the killing fields of Belgium and France in World War I, battle lines hardened and a long and destructive period of trench warfare began. From the beginning, the British and French governments sought help wherever they could find it; they saw opportunity in the Middle East. For four centuries the region had been part of the Ottoman Empire, which was based in Turkey. Persuading Arabs to revolt against the Ottomans, who were allied with Germany, became an important military objective for Britain. In addition, the prospect of carving up and grabbing a piece of the decaying Ottoman Empire was enticing to each of the major participants in World War I.

In pursuit of these goals, the British high commissioner in Egypt, Henry McMahon, in 1915 engaged in negotiations with emir Hussein bin Ali, the Arab tribal and religious leader in the area of western Arabia that includes the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

Although there is much dispute among historians about the nature and significance of these negotiations, the emir and his Arab allies thought they were getting a British commitment of support for an independent Arab nation, extending from what is now Iraq through Syria and the Arabian peninsula (with some exclusions), in exchange for an Arab revolt against the Turks.



Hussein bin Ali, first king of Hejaz, pictured in 1922.

Beginning well before the onset of war, Zionist leaders had sought support from Britain, then still regarded as the dominant world power. The British government's interest rose as its losses mounted in the war. The prime minister, David Lloyd George, later testified that in these discussions he was motivated by a desire to encourage support for Britain from the United States and Russia, both with large Jewish populations.

The culmination of all of this came in the form of a letter from the British foreign secretary, Lord Arthur Balfour, to Baron Walter Rothschild, a leader of the Jewish community in Britain, in 1917. The letter expressed support for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people," subject to "it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious

rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country."

Few documents have been subjected to the microscopic analysis accorded the Balfour Declaration in the 97 years since it was published. The obvious questions — What does "a national home" mean? How could this be accomplished without "prejudice [to] the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine?" — were followed by many others, some of which continue to be the subject of interpretation. The Zionists, however, believed they had received a commitment of British support for a Jewish state in Palestine.

The apparent contradiction in the positions taken by the British government in the McMahon-Hussein negotiations and in the Balfour Declaration were further complicated by an agreement reached in 1916 (the Sykes-Picot Agreement, named after the British and French diplomats who negotiated it). Under the treaty's terms, Britain, France, and later Russia agreed to divide among themselves control of the lands of the Ottoman Empire after the war. Palestine was to be under international administration. Although the agreement itself was subsequently repudiated, in 1922 Britain and France received mandates from the League of Nations to govern most of the region.

While Sykes and Picot — and their colleagues — no doubt believed they were serving their respective national interests, neither did their countries any favor. Britain especially suffered through nearly three decades of hostility, violence, and enormous expense, as both Jews and Arabs came to regard their mandate rulers as biased, or incompetent, or both.

From the beginning of the mandate to its end in 1948, the British struggled unsuccessfully to contain the tensions between the Arabs and Jews. As Jewish immigration rose, Arab resentment grew and erupted into riots and outbreaks of violence in 1933 and, more widespread and intense, from 1936 to 1939. In response the British were militarily aggressive; there were many arrests and some executions. Politically, however, Britain made a significant gesture to the Arabs in 1939 by issuing a white paper which renounced its commitment to a Jewish national home in Palestine and restricted immigration of Jews to the area to 75,000 over five years. This, of course, angered the Jewish inhabitants, who turned increasingly toward political and military self-governing institutions. A militia called Haganah (Hebrew for "defense") was created, initially to protect Jewish settlements. Later, it played a major role in the 1948 war.

British politician Lord Arthur Balfour pointed out a feature of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to Sir Ronald Storrs, governor of Jerusalem, during a visit to the city on April 9, 1925. The city's Arab residents were on strike as a protest against the Balfour Declaration supporting plans for a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

World War II was a turning point, not just in Europe but also in the Middle East. The Jewish community, known as the Yishuv, supported the Allies. The Arabs were split: Some supported the Allies and a few thousand even fought with the British, but more supported the Axis powers, most notably the grand mufti of Jerusalem, who spent the war years in Germany. The earlier British decision to limit Jewish immigration into Palestine later resulted in the rejection of many Jews who were trying to flee the Holocaust. This generated widespread international criticism of British policy and added to discontent in Britain over the mandate.

At its peak the British military force in Palestine exceeded 100,000 troops — a huge expense for a country reeling from the cost and other burdens of World War II. Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir — both of whom would later be elected prime minister of Israel — became the leaders of two of several Jewish paramilitary factions that had been organized in response to the earlier Arab uprisings.

These groups began a campaign of violence to force the British to withdraw. The most publicized event was the 1946 bombing of the British military headquarters at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, in which 91 people died. The government of Israel increased its efforts to suppress the paramilitary groups, even as those groups continued their violent attacks. In Britain, the desire to withdraw intensified. The British

government in 1947 announced that it would leave Palestine the next year and asked the United Nations General Assembly to assume control there.

On Nov. 29, 1947, the General Assembly adopted a resolution proposing that Britain's mandate be replaced by a plan of partition under which there would be an independent Arab state, an independent Jewish state, and the city of Jerusalem would be placed under an international regime administered by the United Nations. The agreement triggered a new round of violence, resulting in thousands killed and many more injured. Ultimately the Israelis accepted the plan, but the Arabs did not. By early 1948 the sporadic violence coalesced into organized military operations. The Haganah became the Israel Defense Force, and the paramilitary groups were forced to disband and join the IDF. They were opposed by what came to be known as the Arab Liberation Army.

The British gradually withdrew their forces, a process completed on May 14. On that same day David Ben-Gurion publicly proclaimed the establishment of the state of Israel. Almost immediately President Harry Truman announced US recognition.

Several Arab countries then entered the fray, but their efforts were not effectively coordinated. In response to a question about why he seemed so confident, Ben-Gurion said it was because Israel had a secret weapon: "the Arabs." By the following spring, Israel had prevailed on all fronts, the fighting wound down, and a series of armistices were signed.

Arab soldiers guarded a road on May 10, 1948, during the Arab-Israeli War.

Amid the strife, however, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians left or were driven from their homes and communities, some of which were destroyed. Most ended up in refugee camps in Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and elsewhere. There they have remained for 65 years. At the same time, many Jews living in Arab countries were expelled.

The Palestinians' right of return to their homes — through their descendants — remains one of the several contested issues between Israel and the Palestinians.

Wars between Israel and neighboring Arab states broke out in 1967 and 1973. Israel prevailed in both, expanding its military superiority and its territory to include the Gaza strip and the West Bank.

In 1977, the Egyptian president, Anwar Sadat, made a surprise, historic visit to Jerusalem where he met with Begin, the then Israeli prime minister. A year later Sadat and Begin accepted President Jimmy Carter's invitation to Camp David where they reached agreement on a framework for peace. A formal treaty between Egypt and Israel was signed on March 26, 1979. Sadat's decision to do so angered some in Egypt, and he was assassinated two years later. President Bill Clinton later encouraged negotiations between Israel and Jordan, and the leaders of those two countries signed a peace treaty on Oct. 26, 1994.

On May 14, 1948, Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion proclaimed the birth of the new Jewish state of Israel.

Internal divisions emerge

Yet, as the two parties appeared to be making strides toward a peaceful existence, internal differences began to cloud any progress.

In 1964 the Palestine Liberation Organization was established in opposition to Israel's existence. For the next quarter century, under the leadership of Yasser Arafat, it waged yet another campaign of violence. One of the most publicized was the killing of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich by a PLO faction called Black September.

Nonetheless, the PLO agreed to a two-state solution in 1988, recognized Israel and its right to exist in peace and security in 1993, and, in 1996, repealed the provisions in its charter that called for armed resistance and the destruction of the state of Israel. Arafat died in 2004 and was succeeded by Mahmoud Abbas, who continues today as the president of the Palestinian Authority, the executive branch of the Palestinian government.

The division among Palestinians between those who favor retaining the right of armed resistance and those who oppose violence and favor peaceful negotiation is now manifested in the competition between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, which is led by Fatah, its major political party.

The Palestinian Authority is a secular organization and is supported by the United States. Hamas, on the other hand, seeks to establish an Islamic state, and the United States has designated it a terrorist organization.

The first Palestinian intifada — or uprising — took place in 1987, during which Hamas was established as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. That conflict resulted in the PLO renouncing violence and accepting a two-state solution.

An Israeli woman soldier, a member of the Haganah, in 1948.

That resolve, however, was muddied in 2006 when, in an election promoted by the Americans, Hamas won a majority in the Palestinian parliament, with Abbas continuing on as president and chief executive. The following year, after a brief battle in Gaza, Hamas routed the PA's military force and seized control there. As a result, the internal Palestinian split became geographic as well as political: The PA controls the West Bank with about 2.7 million residents, while Hamas controls Gaza, with a population of about 1.8 million, although the PA still has many loyalists in Gaza and Hamas has many in the West Bank.

After Hamas gained control of Gaza, the so-called quartet — the United States, the United Nations, the European Union, and Russia — issued a statement of principles which called upon Hamas to commit to nonviolence, recognize the state of Israel, and accept previous peace agreements. To date Hamas has refused to do so.

The prior agreements include the Oslo Accords of 1993, which were the product of secret negotiations conducted in Norway's capital. Under those accords, the Palestinians gained a limited degree of self-governance under the newly created Palestinian Authority. The signing of these accords — which promised a peace agreement to reach a two state solution — sparked intense debate within Israel. Yitzhak Rabin, the prime minister who negotiated and signed the accords, was assassinated in 1995 by an Israeli who opposed them.

In 2000, Arafat and Israel's then prime minister, Ehud Barak, met at Camp David with Clinton. After they were unable to reach agreement, the second intifada broke out. It continued for four years with the loss of more than 3,000 Palestinian and nearly 1,000 Israeli lives.

Ariel Sharon, who had defeated Barak in an election in 2000, unilaterally withdrew Israeli armed forces and settlers from Gaza in 2005, but tensions have remained high between Israel and Hamas along the border. Open conflict erupted in late 2008, in 2012, and, most recently, this summer, as Israel tried to eliminate rocket fire from Gaza and to destroy tunnels between Gaza and Israel, while Hamas sought the lifting of the blockade on Gaza that Israel and Egypt have imposed since 2007.

US President Jimmy Carter, Egypt's Anwar Sadat, left, and Israel's Menachem Begin stand on March 26, 1979, shortly before the signing of the Middle East peace treaty.

Moving forward: The realities that inform future negotiations

Where does this history leave us today? No doubt this severe condensation leaves out many important events, but I offer these because, along with my personal experience in the region, they lead me to the following conclusions about the current state of Israeli-Palestinian relations:

1. The conflict has gone on for a very long time and has included a great deal of violence. As a result, hostility and mistrust between Israelis and Palestinians are at very high levels. Those strong negative attitudes are intensified by a profound sense of victimization in both societies; indeed, their disagreements include skepticism and even denial about some parts of the other's narrative.

2. In the past, skepticism and disagreements were overcome by strong and committed leaders. Israel has had a peace treaty with Egypt for 35 years and with Jordan for 20 years. Yet mirroring attitudes in both societies, the personal level of mistrust between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Abbas is high. Each appears to have no confidence in the other's sincerity and seriousness of purpose and thus no confidence in the prospect of a successful outcome. As a result, each has been reluctant to take political risks that would subject him to intense domestic criticism.

3. Both societies are also divided internally. The PA has committed to recognizing Israel, to nonviolence, to seeking a state through peaceful negotiation, and to compliance with previous agreements. Hamas refuses to commit to these principles.

In Israel, many still favor a two-state solution. But many others — including several members of the cabinet — are outspokenly opposed to there ever being a Palestinian state in the West Bank.

4. The PA has little to show for its commitment to a two-state solution through nonviolence and peaceful negotiation over the 20 years since the signing of the Oslo Accords. The continued lack of progress toward a state will undermine the PA's status and cause more Palestinians and other Arabs to support armed resistance.

5. There have been 12 American presidents and 20 secretaries of state since 1948. Each has tried to reconcile the differences between Israelis and Palestinians. In recent decades, there has been substantial continuity in their policies, which include a firm commitment to Israel's security and to the establishment of an independent and viable Palestinian state.

Over the next two days, I will address whether and how, given these conclusions, the United States can help achieve reasonable and sustainable security for Israel and a viable, independent, and sovereign state for the Palestinians, and also advance its policies in the broader region.

George Mitchell, Peace is Needed Now: "Mideast peace now ; Israel is running out of time; Palestinians are running out of options" [Part 2 of 3]

Boston Globe, 9/8/14

An ultra-Orthodox Jewish man watched as a truck transported Iron Dome anti-missile batteries in the southern city of Ashdod on Nov. 17, 2012.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is deeply rooted in history and involves highly emotional issues: religion, national identity, territorial competition.

The strife has gone on for so long, it has had such destructive effects, and the level of mistrust and hostility is so high that many in the Middle East and elsewhere regard it as unsolvable.

But the renewed pursuit of peace is important to the region and to the United States for many reasons. As 9/11 demonstrated -- and as the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria as well as Boko Haram in Nigeria remind us today -- there are many evil people and groups in the world. And many of those most hostile to the United States are based in the Middle East.

It's also a region where several countries are American allies. Regrettably, some of them are also at odds with each other.

Peace between Israel and the Palestinians and the resulting stability in the region would help to deprive the extremists of the chaos in which they thrive. It would also allow the United States to unite its allies to confront and take preventive action against the extremists on their home turf.

Beyond terrorism, the Middle East is centrally located between Europe, Asia, and Africa. Any conflict there could spill over and bring in other world powers in a way that could threaten American political, economic, and military interests. Consider, for instance, that a large portion of the known oil reserves are in the region, and the continuing supply of that oil remains vital to most of the world's advanced economies, even amid the transition to a lower carbon future.

Moreover, the United States has long had a strong commitment to Israel's existence and security as well as, more recently, a firm commitment to the establishment of a viable, independent, and sovereign Palestinian state.

In the highly volatile Middle East, instability in one part of the region feeds instability in another part. Resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would dramatically improve America's credibility in the region and could make it possible for Israel and the Sunni-dominated monarchies to work together to combat their common foe: extremist forces across the region.

Achieving these goals requires the United States' maximum effort, despite the difficulties and setbacks. The key is easy to state but difficult to achieve: It is the mutual commitment of Israel and the Palestinians to reach agreement, with the active participation of the US government, and the support and assistance of the many other governments and institutions that can and want to help. The international community can be most of help by encouraging both sides to look past their historic grievances and to look instead towards a negotiation that deals with the nuts-and-bolts realities of the situation today.

In a major policy speech in Jerusalem in Jan. 2009, President George W. Bush said: "The point of departure for permanent status negotiations .[226 128 138].[226 128 138]. is clear: There should be an end to the occupation that began in 1967. The agreement must establish Palestine as a homeland for the Palestinian people, just as Israel is a homeland for the Jewish people. These negotiations must ensure that Israel has secure, recognized, and defensible borders. And they must ensure that the state of Palestine is viable, contiguous, sovereign, and independent. It is vital that each side understands that satisfying the other's fundamental objectives is key to a successful agreement. Security for Israel and viability for the Palestinian state are in the mutual interest of both parties."

The president's main point bears repeating: The United States supports the establishment of a Palestinian state, but for that to happen, Israel must have reasonable and sustainable security. The establishment of a Palestinian state will help Israel achieve that security. Success is in their mutual interest.

On taking office in 2009, President Obama reaffirmed that policy.

He appointed me as special envoy to the region, further signaling his administration's desire to forge an Israeli-Palestinian peace. It seemed then that the culture of peace, so carefully nurtured during the Oslo Process in 1993, had largely dissipated, to be replaced by a sense of futility, despair, and, ultimately, the inevitability of conflict. Fighting in Gaza, which had erupted the prior year, had just ended. The Palestinians were deeply divided, and uncertainty around upcoming Israeli elections lay ahead. Few believed that there was any chance for rebooting peace negotiations, let alone achieving a peaceful end to the conflict.

Today, in the aftermath of another, even more destructive round of fighting in Gaza, the morale may be even worse.

Many have given up on the two-state solution as efforts to achieve it have not succeeded. The criticism is justified, but no critic has advanced a more credible or feasible alternative. The fact that a two-state solution has not yet been achieved is not in itself conclusive proof that it can never be achieved. Peacemaking requires patience and perseverance.

In Northern Ireland, centuries of discord and violence -- and many failed negotiations -- preceded the Good Friday Agreement. Just a few days before it was reached, a public opinion poll revealed that 83 percent of those in Northern Ireland believed that no detente was possible.

Of course, the history and current circumstances in the Middle East are different, so the benefits of comparison are limited. But it is clear that past failures to achieve peace do not make that result inevitable. I believe there is no such thing as a conflict that can't be ended. Conflicts are created and sustained by human beings. They can be ended by human beings.

A solution, however, cannot be imposed externally. The parties themselves must negotiate directly, with the active and sustained support of the United States. This will require compromise and flexibility from the Israelis and the Palestinians. Most of all it will require leadership.

Although he tried very hard, Secretary of State John Kerry's recent diplomatic efforts have not been successful, nor the previous effort by former Secretary Hillary Clinton. But I still believe this conflict can be ended, in part because the pain required to negotiate an agreement -- while substantial for both sides -- will be much less than the pain that will result if these negotiations don't happen.

Secretary of State John Kerry (left) has not been successful in efforts to achieve peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

If the conflict resumes, both Israelis and Palestinians could face an uncertain future. That, of course, includes the loss of many lives. But there are other potential dangers that both parties must recognize.

For the Israelis, I will mention just some of the many challenges. The first is demography. There are now about 6 million Jews living in the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. In the same space, there are about 5.5 million Arabs, including Israeli Arabs and Palestinians on the West Bank and in Gaza. The Arab birth rate overall is much higher. Within just a few years, Arabs will be in the majority.

As Ehud Barak, the former prime minister and defense minister of Israel, has said, Israel then will have to choose between being a Jewish state or being a democratic state. It cannot be both once the two-state solution is lost. That is a painful choice Israel should not have to make.

Their second challenge is in technology. A serious military threat to Israel now comes from rockets. Hamas still has thousands of them. They're crude, lacking in guidance or destructive power. But they do create widespread fear and anxiety in Israel. And can anyone doubt that, in the absence of a peace agreement, over time Hamas will rebuild and improve their arsenal?

In Lebanon, on Israel's northern border, Hezbollah already has thousands of rockets aimed in its direction -- the public estimates in Israel are between 30,000 and 50,000. They're somewhat more

effective, although also limited in range, and before fighting in Syria erupted, Hezbollah was engaged in an effort to upgrade their systems.

Most threatening to Israel, however, Iran now has rockets that can reach Israel from inside Iran itself. The Iranians don't yet have the precision needed to strike specific targets, but they could cause vast destruction in cities.

The United States is fully committed to Israel's security. We have provided enormous financial and military support to Israel. Most recently President Obama provided hundreds of millions of dollars to accelerate Israel's development and deployment of the Iron Dome anti-missile system. Although its early use has been promising, it is unknown whether that or any system could intercept the number and quality of missiles that might be launched in an all- out conflict. Israel's very existence might then be threatened.

Israel's third challenge is its isolation. It's true that its support in the United States is strong, especially in Congress, but similar support is declining elsewhere in the world, particularly in the wake of the most recent round of violence in Gaza.

Some in Israel and in the United States are concerned that a Palestinian state might fail and be taken over by Hamas. That's a valid concern. But many others believe, as I do, that the collapse of the Palestinian Authority and a takeover by Hamas is more likely in the absence of an agreement with Israel than as the result of such an agreement. One of the many adverse consequences of the recent fighting in Gaza is the extent to which it adversely affected the political standing of President Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority among Palestinians and other Arabs, making a negotiated agreement even more difficult than it was before.

Of course, there is no policy decision that is free of risk. But finding middle ground is the only way to open up the possibility of movement toward normalization of relations between Israel and other countries in the region, many of whom share Israel's deep concern about the threat from Iran and the extremist groups now menacing the region.

The Palestinians also face serious hurdles, particularly the indefinite continuation of occupation under which they do not have the right to govern themselves and therefore lack the dignity that comes with self-governance. In 1947, the United Nations proposed a plan to partition the area and create two states. Israel accepted it. The Arabs rejected it. And the next year brought the first of several wars, all of them won by an increasingly strong Israel.

Every sensible Arab leader today would gladly accept that 1947 plan if it were still available. But it is not -- and it never will be available again. The circumstances on the ground have changed too dramatically. Since then, the plans offered to the Palestinians have been less and less attractive, and likewise have been rejected.

But, as I directly told both Yasser Arafat, the late chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, and President Abbas, there is no evidence to suggest that the offers are going to get any better in the future.

The interests of the Palestinian people would best be served if their leaders sat down, participated in, and stayed in direct negotiations to get the best deal they can negotiate, even if it's not 100 percent of what they want. They must bring the occupation to an end. They've got to get their own state and build on it.

Salam Fayyad, when he was prime minister of the Palestinian Authority, tried to lay the foundation by building the institutions needed for a viable, independent state. But Fayyad resigned in 2013, and his state-building efforts cannot be sustained in the absence of any progress on the political side. They are inextricably linked -- there must be progress on both.

For the Palestinians, their internal divisions are a complicated matter that keeps getting even more complicated. The Palestinian Authority and Hamas recently announced that they agreed to form a unity government and schedule elections. These discussions have been going on for seven years. In 2011 and 2012, similar announcements of reconciliation were made and subsequently collapsed. This current round was interrupted by Israeli opposition and the fighting in Gaza, but the effort may be resumed. That could provide a political opening for Hamas to move away from its prior positions as well as open an avenue for meaningful negotiation.

Palestinians run for cover during clashes with Israeli soldiers following a protest outside Ofer, an Israeli military prison near the West Bank city of Ramallah, on Aug. 1.

When Hamas gained control in Gaza in 2007, the United States joined the United Nations, the European Union, and Russia in a statement calling for the group to commit to nonviolence, to recognize the state of Israel, and to accept previous peace agreements. Hamas has so far shown no inclination to accept or even move toward these principles, and there is no assurance it ever will.

Yet, as happened in South Africa and Northern Ireland -- and with the PLO itself -- persistent efforts to wean such groups away from armed resistance and into a political process has, on occasion, succeeded.

It was noteworthy that the recently proposed interim Palestinian government was composed of technocrats, all of whom accepted President Abbas's position on nonviolence. Israel has every right to be wary, but it has itself a long history of negotiating with Hamas through intermediaries, including when Israel secured the release of the captured soldier Gilad Shalit and in recent cease-fire negotiations. The situation is complex, and the odds may be long, but the door to peaceful political negotiation should not be forever closed.

Rebuilding trust is a daunting challenge, not only between political leaders but also two peoples with a long and bitter history of conflict. Still, it is in the best interest of both Israelis and Palestinians to renew hope and to see that peace does prevail. And it is in the United States' best interest to help them succeed.

George J. Mitchell, "America is the only power that can push for peace ; US prosperity and world dominance will extend into the future" [part 3 of 3]

Boston Globe, 9/8/14

A supporter of Israel argued with a supporter of Palestine during a demonstration on Aug. 9 in Washington, D.C.

As the world's dominant power, the United States enjoys many benefits. But it also incurs many burdens, not the least of which is the widespread impression of American omnipotence.

When I speak in Asia, I like to tell a story: A businessman in Pakistan wakes up one morning and goes into the bathroom to take a shower. But, when he turns on the faucet, there's no hot water. "Ah," he says, "Obama and the CIA, again." For some, every problem in the world is an American problem.

The reality, of course, is that the United States' ability to control events in the world is limited. Many pundits and analysts, citing that reality, see the country in decline. I disagree. Though it may not be able to control events, the United States does have unequalled power to influence them. And, in the coming decades, that power will grow, not wane.

Still, as the world's population increases, as the size and influence of China and India grow, as political turmoil rises, the United States will face many new challenges in deciding how to deploy its political, economic, and military power.

But even in the face of these misperceptions and challenges, the United States can and must remain engaged in seeking peace in the Middle East.

SHAPING A NEW WORLD ORDER

It took 1,800 years after the birth of Christ for the earth's population to reach 1 billion. The most recent billion -- the 7th -- was added in 13 years. The United Nations projects that by 2050, the world population will reach about 9.5 billion people. It will later peak around 10 billion, then level off and begin to decline. Most of the growth will be in Asia and Africa.

Of the current population one in five is Muslim, about 1.2 billion. Fifty years from now, one in three will be Muslim, or about 3.5 billion. To put that figure into perspective, that was the total population of the world as recently as 1970.

Although we should be skeptical of all human predictions (including population projections), the overwhelming military dominance achieved by the United States makes it unlikely that there will be a major war among large nation-states in the foreseeable future. In that sense, the world is a safer place today than it was in the 20th century when more than 75 million people died in two world wars in countries where the population was much smaller than it is today.

But serious threats to stability remain. In the coming decades, the upheavals we now regard as extraordinary will be the norm. Across a wide swath of the globe, from the western portions of Asia through the Middle East as well as throughout Africa, growing populations will mean rising demand for natural resources, for jobs, for political and economic power. Many millions more will be displaced from their homes to become refugees, within or outside of their countries.

The huge strain now placed on receiving nations in Europe, North America, and Australia will increase dramatically as millions seek an alternative to violence, poverty, and a profound lack of opportunity. These problems are and will continue to be aggravated by poor governance and widespread corruption.

In the Muslim world, these challenges will be exacerbated by internal conflicts. One such tension, the division between Sunnis and Shiites, began at Islam's founding nearly 1,400 years ago, in the political competition to succeed the Prophet Mohammed. That strain, in the centuries since, has seen alternating periods of expansion and remission. Today, however, the division is violent and intensifying, as has been witnessed in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.

Moreover, many Arab nations have faced other similar hurdles: unstable governments (both military and secular); the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates (in Egypt and the Palestinian territories); monarchs' fear of Islamist extremists within their borders (Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates); and, throughout the region, between fundamentalists who want theocratic states and moderates who favor a more tolerant form of Islam.

The Islamic State, Boko Haram, Al Qaeda, and the Muslim Brotherhood are but a few of the modern manifestations of a history of groups in the Middle East using religion-fueled violence to advance their objectives. Such groups will continue to emerge for the foreseeable future.

How the United States and its Western allies deal with this turbulence will be one of the major factors shaping the geopolitics of the next half century. There will undoubtedly be occasions on which US military action will be justified; the public murder of Americans will not go unanswered.

But these should be limited actions of last resort. We must be careful not to be drawn decisively into the Sunni-Shiite quarrel, and we should not assume a wider "clash of civilizations." Rather the United States should seek out, encourage, and support those actors who want to build open and tolerant societies of their own, even as we acknowledge the difficulties which we and they face.

It is inevitable that the media focus is on the sensational and the negative. An unfortunate consequence is that when many Americans think of Muslims, they think of people who are different and dangerous "others," prone to extremism and violence. There are, of course, many such people in Muslim societies, including the Islamic State fanatics now spreading murder and mayhem across northern Iraq as well as Boko Haram in Nigeria.

But these groups are not representative of all Muslims. The grand mufti, the highest ranking religious leader in Saudi Arab, recently called the Islamic State and Al Qaeda Islam's number-one enemy. In my experience, most members of Muslim societies want the same things that most Americans want in their lives: a decent, safe, and stable environment in which men and women can find productive work, be part of a community, and, most important, give their children a good start in life. Their concept of the relationship between government and religion may be different, their language and dress may be different, but their humanity is not different.

Unfortunately, it is often the case that the most strident voices and violent actors gain attention and authority.

I believe that US power, already great, will continue to grow along with our population. Both the United Nations and the American government estimate the country's population at about 440 million in 2050. Our neighbors, Mexico and Canada, are friendly and are likely to remain so. We are well on the way to energy independence, and our society remains a haven for innovation and entrepreneurship. The United States is on the brink of a sustained period of renewed economic growth that will extend and expand our dominance far into the future.

ASSESSING RUSSIA, INDIA, AND CHINA

Power is, of course, relative. That means, in addition to power plays in the Middle East, we must consider other major powers.

Fifty-five percent of the Russian government's revenues come from taxes on oil and gas. The break-even point for its national budget requires oil be priced at about $110 per barrel. Few experts expect the price to remain at or above that level in the foreseeable future, unless the conflicts in the Middle East expand dramatically. So Russia faces a severe financial crisis.

In addition, Russia's population will continue to decline. And, its composition will change, as the number of Slavs decrease while the number of Muslims increases.

When he first took office President Vladimir Putin said he was concerned that for the first time in centuries Russia faced the possibility of slipping into the second or third rank of nations. His concern was justified. He may succeed in reestablishing dominance in parts of what he calls "New Russia," but it will be a costly and fleeting victory. And neither he nor any future Russian leader will be able to recreate the Soviet empire.

In contrast, China and India will grow in economic strength and influence, but they too will face daunting problems.

In 1985, just after Mikhail Gorbachev assumed power, I was one of a small group of US senators who met with him in the Kremlin. The subject was the reduction of nuclear weapons, but the discussion was wide-ranging. I asked him whether the Soviet Union could give its citizens free choice in economic affairs while denying it to them in political affairs. He said he believed the Communist Party could be reformed from within. Boris Yeltsin knew better. Although he was not Gorbachev's equal in intellect, he had a better sense of Russian politics. He knew that Communism had to be swept away, and a new order created. Is there now a Yeltsin in China? Can the Chinese do what the Russians could not? No one can know the answers to those questions.

But I do know that, despite its enormous capacity and potential, China faces major obstacles. The rule of law and an independent judiciary -- so critical to individual freedom and to business investment -- have not been firmly established. Corruption is an ongoing issue, one that the country's new leader has gone to extraordinary lengths to try to deal with but that requires a fundamental in culture to overcome fully. The demand for energy continues to rise, fueling more pollution and more protests, which can contribute to destabilization. The Chinese are an energetic and talented people, but, even with their many strengths, the country faces a long road to becoming the world's dominant power.

India already is the world's largest democracy. It soon will become the world's largest country population-wise. By the middle of this century there will be 1.8 billion Indians -- a full 500 million more people than in China. But India, too, faces staggering problems, including a large and slow-moving bureaucracy; endemic corruption; a huge number of under-educated and unskilled rural residents, most of whom live in poverty and lack opportunity; and the continuing threat of internal religious strife. India is and will be important precisely because it is the world's largest democracy. But it is also unlikely to become the dominant world power.

US Secretary of State John Kerry prepared to return to Washington from Paris on July 26 after participating in efforts to reach a longer truce between Israel and Hamas.

PREPARING THE UNITED STATES FOR THE FUTURE

I believe that, as far into the future as human beings can see, the United States will be strong and dominant. That, of course, doesn't mean we don't face our own challenges. I will mention just a few.

First, we must never lose sight of the reality that military power and world influence are grounded in economic strength. It is the foundation upon which all else is built. We must somehow find the way to get our political and financial houses in order. It would take a separate and long article to give this issue the attention it deserves; but we all know it's an urgent need.

Second, we must stand true to our principles. Our democratic ideals distinguished our nation from the very beginning, and they have always appealed to people all around the world. They still do.

Our economic strength and our military power are necessary and important. But our ideals have been and are the primary basis of American influence in the world. They're not easily summarized, but surely they include: The sovereignty of the people; the primacy of individual liberty; opportunity for every member of society; an independent judiciary; and the rule of law, applied equally to all citizens and to the government itself.

We must never forget that the United States was a great nation long before it was a great economic or military power.

Third, in the turbulence of the 21st century, the United States will often be asked to intervene militarily in other lands to resolve complex disputes. We will undoubtedly, and appropriately, respond to some. But we must be careful in deciding when and where to do so. As large and strong as our nation is, we do not have the capacity to solve every problem in the world. Many of the requests will be heart-wrenching and persuasive. But all must be carefully measured through the prism of our national interest.

There are, of course, many tools other than military force we can and should use to help our friends and protect our interests; among them are diplomatic, economic, financial, technological, and covert actions. It's easy to say these words. It will be extraordinarily difficult to apply them to real-life situations, especially those we cannot now foresee. That will be a great challenge for American leadership in the coming decades.

Finally, we must work to realize the aspiration of opportunity for all in our society. Before I entered the Senate, I had the privilege of serving as a federal judge. My favorite part was when I presided over what are called naturalization ceremonies -- that is, welcoming new American citizens.

A group of people, who'd come from all over the world and who'd gone through all of the required procedures, gathered before me in a federal courtroom in Maine. There I administered to them the oath of allegiance to the United States, and I made them Americans. It was always very emotional for me because my mother was an immigrant, my father the orphan son of immigrants. They had no education. My mother could not read or write English. She worked the night shift at a textile mill. My father was a janitor. But, because of their efforts, and because of the openness of American society, I, their son, got the education they never had and went on to become the majority leader of the US Senate.

After every ceremony, I made it a point to speak personally with each new citizen, individually or in a family group. I asked them how they came, why they came. Most of us are Americans by an accident of birth. Most of them are Americans by an act of free will, often at great risk to themselves and their families. Although their answers were as different as their countries of origin, there were common themes, best summarized by a young Asian man. When I asked why he came, he replied, in slow and halting English, "I came because here in America everybody has a chance."

Think about the fact that a young man who'd been an American for just a few minutes, who could barely speak English, was able to sum up the meaning of our country in a single sentence. America is freedom and opportunity, a society in which no one should be guaranteed success but everyone should have a fair chance to succeed.

To achieve that outcome, it is essential that there be opportunity for all. From the experience of daily life Americans know that remains an aspiration; it is not a yet a reality. As a nation, we face the great challenge of making it a reality, of creating and sustaining a society which encourages striving and success, which is conducive to innovation, which enables us to benefit from the talent, energy, and skill of every American. That means every child in America should have the care, early development, and

education to enable them to rise as high and as far as their talent and their willingness to work and to take risk will take them.

Too much of our national discourse today is negative and focused on the past. That's not how we became the world's leader. It was, rather, looking forward with optimism and hope and acting with energy and boldness. Of course we've made mistakes, big mistakes, lots of them. But no society has been more willing to confront and correct its errors, or has demonstrated greater resilience in rebounding from failure. We've had a great history. I believe an even greater future lies ahead.

But it lies in a world of increasing trade, communication, and global connections -- all of which make isolationism obsolete. We cannot abandon our role as world leader, even as we continually reshape it to meet ever-changing circumstances. We cannot withdraw from the Middle East without risking that the problems of the Middle East will find their way to our homeland. For all these reasons, we also must respond to the challenge of helping Israel and the Palestinians end their conflict and make peace.

US Secretary of State John Kerry sat in a service hallway of a hotel in Cairo, Egypt, on July 25, as he spoke with Qatar's Foreign Minister Khaled al-Attiyah on the phone. The two discussed terms of a cease-fire in fighting in Gaza.

George J. Mitchell is the former US special envoy to the Middle East and US Senate majority leader. He now serves as the chairman emeritus of the international law firm DLA Piper.