

The Clinton/Albright Plan— Step 1, Fight Terror; Step 2, Make Peace Fast

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Brief Analysis

The Clinton administration responded to internal and international pressure to ratchet up its role in the Arab-Israeli peace process yesterday with two important statements—a full-scale speech by Secretary of State Albright and extended comments by President Clinton at a Rose Garden press conference. The result was two key shifts in administration policy:

(1) Endorsement of a sequential approach toward the next steps in the peace process, in which the administration expects substantial improvement on security issues in advance of, not necessarily in parallel with, re-engagement in negotiations. Until now, the administration's usual exhortation has been that both parties must each take steps simultaneously—the Palestinian Authority, to fight terror; Israel, to refrain from settlement building and other acts that have led to a "crisis of confidence." The new formulation reflects a judgment that, as Albright said, "the sine qua non for progress is a mutual commitment to security against violence."

Although the administration kept up its critique of the Netanyahu government for "unhelpful" but "technically legal" steps—implicit references to the opening of the Hasmonean tunnel and Har Homa construction—endorsing the sequential paradigm marks a significant nod toward Israel. Whereas jumpstarting negotiations was to be the main topic on Ambassador Dennis Ross' aborted trip to the Middle East last week, when he does go this weekend, Albright said, security will be the "primary focus." More importantly, this shift included the first specific, public criticism by President Clinton that the PA has not given "constant, 100 percent effort" in the fight against terrorism. While the administration has often said the PA could do more, this was the first time a senior administration official—who is, of course, the most senior official—said that the PA has knowingly been holding back security cooperation.

Indeed, the president's statement, combined with Albright's detailed enumeration of steps that the PA must take to fulfill its security obligation (i.e., sharing information and coordinating law enforcement action with Israel, detecting and deterring potential terrorist acts, identifying and seizing arms caches, arresting and prosecuting those involved in planning, financing, supplying or abetting terrorism, and "doing everything to create a moral atmosphere in which advocacy of violence and terror withers away") stands in stark contrast to the praise heaped on Arafat during his March 1997 visit to the White House and to the debilitating exchange between the State Department and Israeli

intelligence over the alleged "green light" to terrorism later that month. In yesterday's speech, Albright even echoed the Israeli demand for a PA crackdown on the "infrastructure" of terrorism in the territories—a reference to the connections between Hamas' military wing and its social-welfare front organizations—and only implicitly criticized Israel's decision to withhold tax revenues from the Palestinians, one of the punitive measures imposed on the PA after last week's bombing. (Importantly, Clinton's critique of Arafat's lack of effort could have serious ramifications when Congress considers the extension or revision of the now-expired Middle East Peace Facilitation Act when it reconvenes next month.)

(2) Acceptance of the idea of "marrying" the incremental approach of the Oslo Accords with "accelerated final status" negotiations, a concept propounded by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu earlier this year. In essence, this means that the original Oslo concept of first trying to resolve easy problems (e.g., Gaza and Jericho) as a way to build confidence while postponing talks on the less tractable issues (e.g., borders, settlements, Jerusalem, refugees) has now run its course, to be replaced by a high-risk/high-gain approach which calls for early and intensive negotiations on the issues that most deeply divide the two sides.

This shift in the "process" of peacemaking could have far-reaching implications for the "substance" of talks. First, a "move to final status" usually implies postponement of the thorny issue of "further redeployments," the first of which almost caused the collapse of the Israeli cabinet in March and was, in any case, rejected by the Palestinians as inadequate. (The second "redeployment" is technically scheduled for September; Albright didn't specifically say it would be postponed.) Second, this approach should also show fairly quickly whether the two parties are headed for speedy breakthrough or speedy deadlock, with reverberations for all aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian relationship. Third, as the parties enter what could be the final (though still very long) lap of their negotiations, the very idea of "process" versus "substance" will become blurred. Indeed, the Secretary's promise to "discuss the procedural and substantive aspects of the permanent status issues" during her upcoming Middle East trip means that, for the first time since the Reagan Plan of 1982, American officials will be actively discussing the shape and contours of a possible resolution of the "Palestine question." If critics faulted the administration for having a "hands-off" policy to the peace process the last six months, the new policy envisions the United States, in Albright's words, "at the table" every step of the way. This should appeal to the Palestinians.

Three additional nuances in yesterday's Clinton-Albright statements should be underscored:

- After outlining stiff requirements for Palestinian security efforts, Secretary Albright said that only "some progress" needs to be achieved as a condition for her to travel to the Middle East later this month to spur diplomatic re-engagement. As the date for her trip approaches, defining the extent and adequacy of "progress" could become a tricky issue. Implicitly, this means that the administration believes less than three weeks is enough time for Arafat to adopt significant security measures and for Israel and America to judge whether there are, in Albright's words, "no winks, no double standards, no double meaning [and] no revolving doors" to terrorists. In practice, Arafat will be under intense pressure to act, but before long the pendulum will shift to Netanyahu, who will himself come under pressure later in the month to certify that enough "progress" has been made to merit an end to the closure of the territories, without which it is difficult to imagine an Albright visit. Here, the key question is whether Netanyahu believes that accelerated final status talks are worth waiving some of his demands on security, or, alternatively, whether Netanyahu is strong enough, personally and politically, to tell the Secretary of State not to come to the Middle East because Arafat has not done enough.
- If President Clinton chided Arafat for an inadequate effort on terrorism, Secretary Albright sent a clear message to Jerusalem when she sidestepped a journalist's question of whether she believes Netanyahu is "living up to his commitments under Oslo," saying only that she thinks Netanyahu "believes in peace ... and the Oslo process." To

be sure, this formulation was more discreet than her rarely cited San Francisco comments in June, in which she suggested that the Israeli government had either "forgotten or decided to ignore" some of its Oslo commitments. But her less-than-ringing endorsement yesterday should still give cause for concern in Israel. Historically, the United States and Israel tend to agree on the procedure of negotiations (e.g., direct talks, no international conference) and disagree on specific items in the negotiations themselves (e.g., status of Jerusalem, status of settlements); insulating the overall relationship from these differences on core issues has been one of its unheralded successes. It is in this context that Albright's exhortation that "the days of avoiding hard decisions are over" assumes great importance. Unless Jerusalem and Washington reach a strategic meeting-of-the-minds prior to the start of "final status" talks, the accelerated talks formula could result in accentuating Israeli-American differences on West Bank issues, with potentially devastating implications for the bilateral relationship.

- On the regional level, it is noteworthy that Albright reaffirmed the importance of the Qatar economic summit (though didn't publicly confirm her own plans to attend); specifically praised King Hussein, who has promised Jordan will participate; and criticized states who don't attend for "hurting the peace process and their own economic future." (Egypt's President Mubarak was not mentioned by name in this context, but was referred to later as "our strategic partner in peace.") In response to a question, she also hinted vaguely at some possible movement in the dormant Israel-Syria talks, though it is difficult to foresee a visit to Damascus in the current environment. Significantly, missing from both Albright and Clinton's remarks was any linkage between the peace process and the U.S. policy of "dual containment" to meet the challenges in the Gulf, a connection that was a fixture of the logic of the post-Gulf War Madrid process and of the public diplomacy of the first Clinton administration.



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