

Palestinians Need Tough Talk from Europe

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Europe needs to reciprocate President Obama's 2011 speech with a statement of its own, including clear language on bilateral talks, refugees, and security.

The final communique of the G-8 summit meeting next week in Northern Ireland will invariably mention Middle East peace, perhaps supporting Secretary of State John Kerry's efforts to revive peace negotiations. In any case, any statement will be promptly forgotten when the summit ends. Nevertheless, Europe can help Kerry.

It's worth remembering that just before the G-8 meeting two years ago, President Obama delivered a landmark speech on the Middle East, one that included an important expression of tough love. Here was a president of the United States, the traditional patron of Israel, saying that the baseline for territorial negotiations should be land exchanges based on the boundaries that existed before the 1967 war -- a call that was echoed earlier this year by an Arab League delegation.

Because it delineated territorial terms of a peace accord, Obama's speech was not popular with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Nor was it well-received in the United States, where a leading Republican, Mitt Romney, charged that Obama was "throwing Israel under the bus." Democrats weren't very supportive either.

Obama won initial plaudits from the Europeans, but then there was silence. Unfortunately, the quartet of Middle East peacemakers -- the United States, the European Union, Russia and the secretary general of the U.N. -- never adequately backed the president's speech. After many drafts over the summer of 2011, Moscow helped quash any quartet statement of support due to aspects of the speech that it felt were not sufficiently to the Palestinians' liking.

The quartet has never recovered. It is no longer a diplomatic force, although its special envoy, former Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain, has been involved in favorable economic and governance actions supporting the Palestinians.

It's time for a unified European speech, one that would serve as an analogue to the Obama speech. If the U.S. president told the Israelis things that they didn't want to hear, the European Union, traditional patron of the Palestinians, needs to tell them what they need to hear. Such a speech would give Kerry a chance to succeed, albeit

not a guarantee. It would tell the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, that he doesn't have a free pass from Europe, that E.U. patience with the Palestinians has its limits. It would also tell the Israelis that the deck isn't stacked against them in the international community.

It's hard for Europeans to argue that the Palestinians have exhausted negotiations, given that Abbas has agreed to only three weeks of talks in the last four years, and that an offer in September 2008 by Israel's then-prime minister, Ehud Olmert, never received a reply.

Of course, Netanyahu is not blameless: Consider the expansion of Israeli settlements. But the negotiating track has not been tried in many years, despite the myth to the contrary. The parties only agreed to deal with the final status or core issues one other time apart from 2008 -- in 1999 and 2000, during Bill Clinton's final years in the White House.

In order to give Middle East peace talks a new chance, here are some things that a European speech needs to say:

- The only way to achieve Palestinian statehood is through direct, unconditional talks with Israel. The European Union's council of ministers has said as much in a diplomatic communique, but it is not stated so directly to the Palestinians. The United Nations would willingly endorse statehood, but the Security Council has blocked this in the past, and joining Unesco will not lift Israeli control of the West Bank. The Palestinians must try negotiations. The road to statehood runs through peace.
- Both Jews and Arabs have a historical connection to the land, and therefore, it must be shared.
- Any Palestinian refugee can go to the new state of Palestine, but not to Palestine and Israel.
- Israel is not wrong to insist on strict security arrangements. Security is not ancillary to any deal. Just as the world needs to empathize with the Palestinians' predicament, so too should we see security issues through Israel's eyes. On the Gaza-Egypt border, tunnels have been used to smuggle rockets into Gaza that have been repeatedly and indiscriminately fired on Israeli cities. It is indisputable that aspects of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701 calling for an arms embargo on Hezbollah after the 2006 Lebanon war were never implemented. Moreover, international peacekeepers cannot be the sole basis of security -- as shown by Austria's recent decision to pull out of the U.N. Disengagement Observer Force interposed between Syrian and Israeli forces.

In private conversations, many European diplomats agree with many of these points. But no European leader has shown Obama's courage in endorsing them publicly. Perhaps it is time for the Europeans to stop complaining about the lack of American success in the Middle East. The point is not the identity of the messenger, but rather that there be a unified message.

Europe can and must have an impact. President Obama told the Israelis that they should have no illusions about the territorial price to be paid to end this conflict. The Europeans, no less a supporter of the Palestinians than the United States has been of Israel, need to do the same with the Palestinians. The Europeans need to tell them that E.U. support will no longer be unconditional.

Leadership is not about telling your friends what they want to hear; it's about telling them what they need to hear. Europe needs to reciprocate the Obama speech with one of its own.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute. ❖

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