

What Obama Should Do in Israel

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If the president takes a risk and advocates interim steps, he will be making a major contribution toward sustaining a two-state vision that is slowly fading in the minds of Israelis and Palestinians.

This week, U.S. President Barack Obama will visit Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and Jordan. Obama's advisers, worried about the potential consequences of either addressing the gloomy state of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process head-on or presenting a new U.S. plan for the region, seem inclined to let the president use the visit to reaffirm the same old talking points: the urgency of a two-state solution, the dangers of terrorism, and the drawbacks of further settlement construction. To be sure, Obama will be able to count the staid, highly choreographed trip as a personal success. But if, as expected, he makes no real diplomatic headway, the trip will have served only to damage the administration's already weak efforts to revitalize the peace process.

Obama has every incentive not to waste the visit: for one, almost everybody in the Middle East would interpret a trip that had more glib photo ops than substantive meetings as proof of American disinterest in settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. More broadly, the president can actually achieve some tangible progress toward Israeli-Palestinian peace. To do so, however, he will need to lay the groundwork for partial agreements between the parties instead of continuing to aspire toward the elusive goal of a comprehensive deal.

Obama's hosts, too, could benefit from real engagement on the peace process. Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu knows that he needs to strengthen the Palestinian Authority, lest its collapse pave the way for a third intifada or, ultimately, a Hamas takeover of the West Bank. Netanyahu is well aware that the present situation in the West Bank is not sustainable in the long run. What is more, moving forward on the Palestinian issue would help cement U.S.-Israeli cooperation in preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Meanwhile, Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority, also sorely needs a diplomatic victory. He has made sure that reconciliation talks between his own Fatah movement and Hamas remain in the news but do not reach a positive conclusion. This is because he knows that any free elections would likely crown Hamas the winner.

But Abbas must soon make some real headway; otherwise he will lose the support of Palestinians who suspect that he has become a champion of the status quo. Particularly following his largely meaningless gesture of appealing to the UN for Palestinian statehood, Abbas must produce results on the ground. If Obama prods him toward a gradual approach to negotiations, Abbas may overcome his instinctive opposition to interim arrangements and prove that by re-engaging in talks with the Israelis, he is indeed able to bring more territory under PA control.

Jordan's King Abdullah, too, is eager for progress on the peace process, since he faces the possibility of real internal upheaval in the event of Bashar al-Assad's ouster in Syria. Once the strong Syrian army is defeated, the Palestinian majority in Jordan and the kingdom's Muslim Brotherhood party may decide to try their luck against the Jordanian security forces, which are considerably smaller than Syria's. Abdullah is eager to back Abbas and serve as facilitator in a renewed effort to obtain Israeli concessions. A fruitful peace process leading to a partial agreement would assist Abdullah in tempering Palestinian discontent in his own country.

It is true that any initiative to relaunch negotiations would hit some rough patches. In 2008, despite 35 rounds of extensive negotiations, Abbas rejected a comprehensive Israeli offer. Yet now Abbas demands to resume talks from the point where he and Israel's prime minister at the time, Ehud Olmert, left off. Netanyahu is not committed to his predecessor's failed gambit. In other words, these two are not ready to take a leap in the dark toward final status negotiations.

But Obama could help them along by showing that he is willing to actively support -- and mobilize international support for -- interim steps. At this stage, the parties would be wise to avoid the unbridgeable gaps over such issues as final borders, the fate of Israeli settlements, the status of Palestinian refugees, and the control of Jerusalem's holy sites. Instead, they could consider a number of partial agreements, which could both break the deadlock in the peace process and save Obama's hosts the challenge of making dramatic concessions that they still prefer to defer. Ideally, the interim steps would include the speedy establishment of a Palestinian state over 80 to 85 percent of the West Bank, even as negotiations concerning the core issues continue with American assistance. Such a deal would require evacuating roughly 40,000 settlers -- no simple exercise -- while keeping the densely populated settlement blocs near the armistice lines under Israeli control.

Even if that doesn't work, there are a variety of other, less radical agreements that could be used to get the ball rolling. Those include transferring much of Area C, now under exclusive Israeli control, to Area B, which is under Palestinian Authority control. Another interim step might be switching from the existing Customs Union between Israel and the PA, which creates Palestinian dependence on Israeli tax collection, to something like a free trade zone that would boost the Palestinian economy. What is important is only that the parties aspire to achieve an agreement that makes some progress while falling short of a peace treaty.

For some time, Netanyahu and Abbas have been quite reluctant to opt for an incomplete arrangement. After all, Israel does not want to give up territory without assurances of a broader peace; the Palestinians fear that accepting a provisional state on parts of the West Bank will weaken their claim to the rest of it. But the two sides could be convinced to see the advantages of this approach, simply because it offers better prospects than the unsustainable status quo and allows them to defer the toughest decisions.

If Obama takes a risk and speaks to his hosts in favor of interim steps, he will be making a major contribution toward sustaining the two-state vision, which is slowly fading in the minds of Israelis and, especially, Palestinians. Obama should not waste this opportunity to revive the peace process with some sober, pragmatic diplomacy.

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