

Critiquing Israeli Construction in Jerusalem: Another U.S. Miscue with the Quartet

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Aug 17, 2011

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Brief Analysis

With the Palestinian train heading toward the UN, the light at the end of the tunnel is really just Quartet diplomacy heading in the wrong direction.

At the eleventh hour, the Obama administration is gamely trying to avert President Mahmoud Abbas's promise to apply for full Palestinian membership in the United Nations -- which he is due to hand deliver to the UN secretary-general on September 20 -- by restarting Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The trigger for new talks, which have been suspended by a Palestinian walkout since last autumn, would be a declaration by the Quartet (the United States, European Union, UN, and Russia) defining terms of reference or parameters for the resumption of talks.

The U.S. strategy is to entice the Palestinians away from their self-generated diplomatic train wreck at the UN by building on President Obama's May 2011 speech, endorsed by the G-8 at Deauville, that included the Palestinian-friendly formula of "1967 lines with mutual swaps." No less important as an arrow in the administration's quiver is the sense that the Europeans would prefer a diplomatic alternative to a showdown at the UN, which would not only force a break with Washington but is likely to divide the EU's big three (with France expected to support the Palestinians, Germany supporting the Israelis, and Britain still on the fence).

Despite having logic and reason on its side, the Obama team has had no success. There are multiple reasons for this: the administration delivered its main concession (the 1967 lines) too early in the process, and the Palestinians and Europeans have since pocketed the provision; EU diplomats prefer to cherry-pick the president's May speech, taking the pro-Palestinian aspects (e.g., about the 1967 lines) and rejecting those favorable to Israel (e.g., mutual recognition of Israel as a state for the Jewish people and Palestine as a state for the Palestinian people); the Palestinian leadership is too committed to the UN route to stop the train; and Israel waited too long to accept a formula that may provide an alternative to the UN. Even so, the administration claims to be plowing ahead with the Quartet effort, leaving the group's envoy, Tony Blair, to do the heavy lifting -- evidently with the idea of maintaining plausible deniability that Washington is inching back from any commitments or accepting dilution of the

president's language.

In this context, yesterday's Quartet statement expressing "great concern" about Israeli plans to build additional housing in Jerusalem and the large West Bank settlement of Ariel seems, at best, to run counter to the overall U.S. effort. At a time when Washington is trying to win European support for a new Quartet statement designed to cajole Palestinians away from a UN gambit, it makes little sense for the administration to give away, for free, a condemnation of Israel. In terms of substance, it is bad enough that the administration has once again endorsed the concept that Israeli construction in Jerusalem is forbidden. And at the tactical level, it is even worse that the administration would compound this policy error with the negotiating error of trading away something the Europeans will always sign up for (condemnation of Israel's settlement policy) without getting something they are revealingly reluctant to do in return (endorse, as a goal of negotiations, the mutual recognition of Israel and Palestine as the nation-states for the Jewish and Palestinian peoples, respectively). With the Palestinian train heading toward the UN, the light at the end of the tunnel is really just Quartet diplomacy heading in the wrong direction.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute. ❖

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