

# Filling the Strategy Vacuum in the Middle East

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## Brief Analysis

President Obama made news last month in advocating a borders-and-security-first approach to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and articulating an official view that the territorial solution should be a return to the 1967 lines, amended by mutually agreed land swaps. Those who contend that there was nothing new in the president's comments fail to give him his due; whatever one thinks about the utility or wisdom of his approach, the president most certainly staked out new ground with these principles.

What received less notice was the absence in his remarks of any mechanism for implementing these principles -- no new diplomatic initiative, no new peace envoy, no peace summit, no peace negotiations, not even a trip by the secretary of state. Nor was there any argument explaining the organic connection between his professed urgency for peacemaking and the obvious urgency of two other regional concerns: volcanic political change in Arab states and Iran's threatening hegemonic designs. The president, it seems, was content to articulate a policy without a strategy.

It is no surprise, therefore, that others have begun to fill the vacuum -- a development that is almost always unwelcome. Such was the case with French president Nicolas Sarkozy's initiative for a Paris peace conference, which so incensed Washington that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton dismissed it in the presence of the French foreign minister. And such is the case with two other diplomats who have stepped into the breach this week.

The first such effort -- the false bravado of former Saudi ambassador to Washington Turki al-Faisal -- is likely to be taken with greater seriousness than it deserves. In a sad and ultimately pathetic attempt to scare Washington into choosing between its partnerships with Israel and Saudi Arabia, Turki threatened a diplomatic apocalypse if President Obama follows through on his pledge to oppose a Palestinian end-around to negotiations via a UN resolution on statehood this autumn. After noting in a *Washington Post* op-ed that Saudi leaders "took seriously" the president's call "to embrace democracy" -- whatever that means in one of the world's least democratic states -- Turki prophesied the following: "There will be disastrous consequences for U.S.-Saudi relations if the United States vetoes UN recognition of a Palestinian state. It would mark a nadir in the decades-long relationship as well as irrevocably damage the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and America's reputation among Arab nations. The ideological distance between the Muslim world and the West in general would widen, and opportunities for friendship and cooperation between the two could vanish."

Recent events, of course, suggest precisely the opposite. In last year's test run for this autumn's diplomatic crisis,

there was no visible backlash from Riyadh after the Obama administration vetoed a UN Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlement activity. And just this past week, after the president enunciated his clear opposition to the Palestinians' UN strategy, Saudi leaders put their strategic priorities on display by bucking an anti-Western OPEC decision and helpfully agreeing to increase domestic oil production, thereby denting the continued windfall that Iran has been earning from the recent rise in oil prices.

To be sure, U.S.-Saudi relations are in a funk -- but that has much less to do with Riyadh's exasperation at Obama's alleged pro-Israel bias than with exasperation at what Saudis view as Washington's ill-conceived approach to political change in Arab states, coupled with their longstanding wish for an American *deus ex machina* to solve their Iranian problem (e.g., "cut off the head of the snake"). But we have seen this play before. With Bahrain's situation still uncertain, Yemen imploding, and Iran showing its reach by cementing a new Hizballah-friendly government in Lebanon, the notion that Riyadh would chuck what remains of its seventy-year-old strategic relationship with Washington out of pique at one more U.S. veto of a bad idea at the UN is patently absurd.

The second diplomatic effort to fill the U.S. strategy void comes from the European Union. According to *Haaretz*, EU foreign policy chief Lady Catherine Ashton has reportedly proposed that the Quartet partners (the United States, EU, Russia, and UN) work together to defuse the Palestinians' UN plan via an initiative to define a "reference framework" for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Such a framework would be based on President Obama's peacemaking principles, perhaps with some additional European language on Jerusalem and refugees that is sure to arouse Israeli ire even more than did the president's speech.

In essence, Ashton's initiative -- if reported accurately -- seeks to focus attention on the laudable goal of renewing negotiations, but by the suspect method of cherry-picking what the Europeans like in Obama's principles (the pro-Palestinian focus on the 1967 lines, as amended) while rejecting what they dislike (the pro-Israel commitment to reject a Palestinian UN initiative, without reservations). In this regard, her proposal is more troublesome for Washington than Turki's empty threats -- not because it stands a chance of gaining acceptance in Jerusalem or Washington, but because it signals the failure of Obama's efforts to win unambiguous European endorsement for his position against unilateral Palestinian action to circumvent a diplomatic solution to their conflict with Israel.

In the end, neither Turki's threat nor Ashton's proposal is likely to win the day. The Saudis are not about to go it alone in their regional confrontation with Iran, and the Europeans are not about to displace America as the indispensable broker of peace. Still, feints such as these will consume the time and energy of senior U.S. officials that could have been put to better use advancing what is still lacking from Washington despite all the speeches of recent weeks -- a clear, integrated, comprehensive U.S. strategy for promoting security, peace, and democratic change in the Middle East.

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