

Obama Walking a Fine Line on Borders Issue

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The specific Israeli-Palestinian territorial principles enunciated by President Obama have within them the seeds of deepening tension between the United States and Israel, and perhaps even a rift.

One week ago, on May 19, President Barack Obama delivered powerful remarks on democracy and reform in the Middle East. He not only raised these normally hortatory ideals to top-tier U.S. interests, but he put the dictator of America's most dangerous Arab antagonist -- Syria's Bashar Assad -- on personal notice that he may soon find himself joining the leaders of Egypt and Tunisia in forced retirement. All this was welcome news.

The last part of the president's remarks, however, took a different course. After critiquing Arab regimes that have used the Arab-Israeli conflict as a distraction from their own internal problems, he undermined the potency and effect of his own message by unveiling new -- and controversial -- principles guiding U.S. efforts to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Specifically, the principles he articulated constitute a major departure from long-standing U.S. policy. To argue that they are just a repackaging of previous statements does not hold up under scrutiny. The very fact that they were the subject of such intense internal debate before delivery and prompted such consternation from Israeli leaders afterward underscores that there was, indeed, something new in what the president said.

In his speech, Obama became the first sitting president to say that the final borders should be "based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps." (The Clinton Parameters -- which former President Bill Clinton presented to the two sides in December 2000 and then officially withdrew a month later, when they were not accepted -- did not mention the 1967 borders but did mention "swaps and other territorial arrangements.")

The Obama formulation concretizes a move away from four decades of U.S. policy based on U.N. Security Council resolution 242 of November 1967, which has always interpreted calls for an Israeli withdrawal to a "secure and recognized" border as not synonymous with the pre-1967 boundaries. The idea of land swaps, which may very well

be a solution that the parties themselves choose to pursue, sounds very different when endorsed by the president of the United States. In effect, it means the official U.S. view is that resolution of the territorial aspect of the conflict can only be achieved if Israel cedes territory it held even before the 1967 war.

The president also said that the new Palestinian state should have borders with Egypt, Jordan and Israel, and referred to the "full and phased" withdrawal of the Israel Defense Forces. This statement implies categorical American opposition to any open-ended Israeli presence inside the future "Palestine." This is also the first such statement by a U.S. president, and it differs significantly from the Clinton Parameters, which envisioned three Israeli "facilities" inside the West Bank, with no time limit on their presence.

The president's words also gave official endorsement to the idea that Israelis and Palestinians should first negotiate their territorial dispute and the security arrangements that would govern relations between the two states, leaving the subjects of refugees and Jerusalem for future negotiations. This is an odd reading of the relevance of those two latter issues. For Palestinians, the refugee issue may be powerfully emotive, going to the core of Palestinian identity; for Israelis, however, it is as much an issue of security as ideology. For the president not to repeat previous U.S. government statements -- e.g., that Palestinians will never see their right of return implemented through a return to Israel -- is to raise expectations and inject doubt into a settled topic.

Perhaps more than anything else, the most surprising aspect of the president's peace process statement was that it moved substantially toward the Palestinian position just days after the Palestinian Authority (PA) decided to seek unity with Hamas. Indeed, the president seemed nonplussed that Mahmoud Abbas, president of the PA, has opted to reconcile with Hamas, a group the United States views as a terrorist organization. Hamas-Fatah reconciliation "raises profound and legitimate questions for Israel," the president noted -- but evidently not questions so profound and troubling to the United States that they would impede a shift in U.S. policy that advantages the Palestinians.

Given the importance of these principles, it was odd that the president offered no implementation mechanism to translate these ideas into action. He named no high-level successor to Sen. George Mitchell, the just-resigned peace process envoy, nor announced any practical effort to get the parties back to the negotiating table. In essence, he launched his principles into the ether.

Despite this absence of an action mechanism, the likely next step is for Palestinians to take up the president's call, ask for renewal of negotiations on precisely the terms the president outlined -- borders that are "based on the 1967 lines with mutual swaps," with no reference to refugees or other issues on which the Palestinians would make major compromises -- and wait for Israel to say no.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly objected to the president's emphasis on the 1967 borders -- an unusual way to begin what was a tense White House visit. The two leaders may find a way to blur their differences over the principles outlined in Obama's May 19 speech, given their partnership on strategic issues and mutual interest in political cooperation and amity. But the specific territorial principles on Israeli-Palestinian peace enunciated by Obama have within them the seeds of deepening tension and perhaps even rift between the United States and Israel -- the very distraction from the focus on democratic reform the president said he wanted to avoid.

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