

President Obama, the 'Winds of Change,' and Middle East Peace

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Brief Analysis

Robert Satloff responds to Obama's recommendations regarding Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, made today in his "Winds of Change" speech at the State Department.

President Obama did a great service in sketching out a new paradigm for U.S. engagement with the Middle East in his State Department "winds of change" speech this afternoon, in which he raised the goal of reform and democracy to a top-tier U.S. interest. Nevertheless, after critiquing Arab regimes that have used the Arab-Israeli conflict to distract their peoples from the important business of reform, he undermined the potency and effect of his own message by unveiling a new -- and controversial -- set of principles guiding U.S. efforts to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Specifically, the peace process principles he articulated constitute a major departure from long-standing U.S. policy. Not only did President Obama's statement make no mention of the democracy-based benchmarks injected into this process by President Bush in his June 2002 Rose Garden speech (which might have been appropriate, given the overall theme of his speech), he even included significant departures from the "Clinton Parameters" presented to the parties by the then president in December 2000:

- President Obama is 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, it is important to note, President Clinton officially withdrew before he left office -- 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 UN 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 that the 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.

- Regarding IDF deployment, President Obama said that the 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 Palestinian state. This differs from the Clinton Parameters, which envisioned three Israeli "facilities" inside the West Bank, with no time limit on their presence.
- Although the president noted that he was endorsing a borders-and-security-first approach, leaving the subjects of refugees and Jerusalem for future negotiations, this is an odd reading of the relevance of those two 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 decided to seek unity and reconciliation with Hamas. Indeed, the president seemed nonplussed that Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority, has opted for unity with Hamas, a group the United States views as a terrorist organization. This reconciliation with Hamas "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.

Also odd was the fact that the president offered no implementation mechanism to translate these ideas into real negotiations. He named no high-level successor to Sen. George Mitchell, the peace process envoy who just resigned, nor did he specifically call for the immediate renewal of negotiations.

Despite this absence of a new 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.

Now en route to Washington, Israeli prime minister Netanyahu has already issued a statement objecting to the president's focus on the 1967 borders. The two leaders may find a way to blur their differences over the principles outlined today, given their partnership on strategic issues and mutual interest in political cooperation and amity. But the approach to Israeli-Palestinian peace enunciated today has within it the seeds of deepening tension and perhaps even rift between the two sides -- the very distraction from the focus on democratic reform the president said he wanted to avoid.

Robert Satloff is The Washington Institute's executive director and Howard P. Berkowitz chair in U.S. Middle East policy. ❖

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