

# After the Itamar Massacre

## Correcting the topsy-turvy narrative of U.S. peace process diplomacy

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Brief Analysis

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In the heyday of the Oslo peacemaking era, it would be the work of American diplomats to prevent Israeli outrage over the horrific murders Friday evening of five civilians -- including three children -- in the West Bank settlement of Itamar from undermining the "peace process." But today there is little peace process to protect.

With the exception of three weeks in September 2010, there have been no negotiations between the government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority during the entire Obama administration. Indeed, there has been less peace diplomacy between Arabs and Israelis in the current administration than during any presidency since Lyndon Johnson.

A fair observer would note that there are many reasons why diplomacy has failed to take hold. On the Palestinian side, these reasons include the structural conflict between the Palestinian Authority-controlled West Bank and Hamas-controlled Gaza; reluctance by PA president Mahmoud Abbas to offer historic concessions that his iconic predecessor, Yasser Arafat, has previously rejected; and ongoing ambivalence over the very idea that negotiations provide the most effective route to achieve Palestinian national aspirations. On the Israeli side, obstacles to negotiation include internal divisions within the Israeli governing coalition, ongoing skepticism about the viability of the PA as a strong and responsible peace partner, and uncertainty at the top of the Israeli political system as to whether it is wiser to continue a decades-old strategy of incrementalism or seek a final peace agreement that would settle the conflict once and for all. These problems, which have been present in various forms for years, explain why progress toward a real, secure peace has happened in fits and starts for a long time. Even a smart diplomacy, wisely

executed by the United States, might have little to show for it.

But the sad fact is that the United States has not pursued diplomacy smartly. For almost two years, Obama administration efforts were characterized by an obsessive desire to condition the resumption of negotiations on a total freeze on Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank (and, at times, in Jerusalem too). Although, since autumn, the administration has corrected itself and stopped insisting on a settlement freeze, it hasn't replaced that policy with one based on actually trying to convince the parties back to the table. In this case, that would be the Palestinians, who refuse to negotiate the future disposition of the territory they seek for their own. Indeed, at the current moment, it is not at all clear that the Obama administration is pursuing any diplomacy at all. No visible effort is underway to restart peace talks; indeed, neither the president nor the secretary of states has called for immediate resumption of negotiations, and peace envoy George Mitchell has not visited the area in three months (and only once since September).

Ironically, despite the PA's current refusal to negotiate, the administration appears to believe that Israel is primarily responsible for the absence of diplomacy. Hence, the administration's agonizing internal debate on the decision to veto a UN Security Council resolution condemning Israel last month -- a much closer call than is generally known -- and the president's widely reported (if off-the-record) statement to Jewish leaders earlier this month vouching for the bona fides of Palestinian leaders but questioning whether Israeli leaders truly want peace.

None of this would matter much if the administration had taken to heart one of the most important lessons of the Arab revolutions of 2011: that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may be very important to Israelis and Palestinians (and, perhaps, Jordanians) but it does not motivate much political action elsewhere in the region, negatively or positively. However, that does not appear to be the case. Even with Libya burning, Bahrain in turmoil, and uncertainty reigning in Cairo, Tunis, and Sanaa, the Obama administration is sending strong signals that it expects Israel to jumpstart the peace process with a new initiative in coming weeks.

This is topsy-turvy diplomacy. Israel may have its own reasons for a diplomatic initiative, which Washington should view sympathetically. But from an American perspective, now is the moment for the United States to project the strength of its partnership with Israel, as part of a strategy to reaffirm allies in the region at this time of momentous change. Bolstering the security relationship, as the administration has laudably done, is necessary but not sufficient; at a time of volcanic political change across the Middle East, bolstering the political relationship is essential too.

One place to begin would be clarity from the highest levels of the administration about the need to resume Israeli-Palestinian direct negotiations now, before ideas of internationalizing the conflict or declaring U.S. or Quartet-defined terms for negotiation fully take hold. Taking a firm and early stand that denies the PA the internationalization option only makes sense. After all, the administration reportedly promised that there would be "repercussions" for Palestinian insistence on the Security Council vote, but so far none have been forthcoming.

On the bilateral front, Washington would be wise to quietly revisit the understandings on settlements and final status issues worked out between Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon and President Bush, understandings that were shelved by the Obama team soon he they took office. After all, look at what the Israeli government did in the wake of the Itamar massacre. After considering -- and rejecting -- a long list of responses many in the international community would consider provocative and disproportionate, Jerusalem decided to authorize 500 additional units of construction within settlement blocs, areas near Israel's pre-1967 border that virtually all observers believe will eventually become part of sovereign Israel. In other words, Israel did not respond to the attack in Itamar by building in Itamar, an out-of-the-way settlement not far from Nablus; rather, it endorsed building in the same consensus areas covered in the Bush-Sharon understandings.

At a time of intense national outrage in Israel, this is a remarkably sober approach. Washington should respond by

injecting some sobriety back into its own peace process diplomacy.

*Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute.* ♦

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