

Obama's Peace Process to Nowhere

Nov 22, 2010



Articles & Testimony

Barack Obama's latest offer to Israel in his quixotic quest for a total construction freeze in West Bank settlements seems at first glance to be a sweetheart deal for Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu. In exchange for a 90-day extension of the freeze, Israel reportedly would receive 20 additional F-35 fighter jets worth \$3 billion, a guarantee that the United States will veto any unilateral Palestinian initiative at the United Nations meant to achieve international recognition of a Palestinian state, and a promise that Obama will not request any further extensions of the construction moratorium.

This proposed deal, however, masks an unwelcome shift in U.S. mediation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And the troubling precedents set by this package will serve to dim rather than enhance prospects for a breakthrough in peace negotiations.

The most worrying aspect of Obama's package is the linkages it establishes between Israeli concessions on settlements (and apparently on the pace of construction in Jerusalem as well) and other unrelated policy matters. Washington has long opposed, and frequently vetoed, U.N. Security Council initiatives targeting Israel. The United States has done so not out of a sense of charity, but because the anti-Israel resolutions were unconstructive, unhelpful, and unprincipled. The suggestion that unless there is a construction freeze America will no longer do so will make it far harder for U.S. negotiators to defeat or soften drafts put forward in the council in future years, and encourage further assaults on Israel there. Leaving Israel undefended in the United Nations will make successful negotiations less, not more, likely, for an Israel that is under constant attack will batten down the hatches not "take risks for peace."

More disturbing still is the explicit connection between U.S. security assistance to Israel and the settlement freeze. The offer of additional fighter jets can be interpreted two ways: First, the Obama administration may believe that the jets are unnecessary to Israeli security, and is merely offering them as a sweetener, at a cost of \$3 billion to U.S. taxpayers -- or about \$33 million for each day of the freeze. The second, more ominous explanation is that the United States believes the jets are important to Israel's security and the two countries' shared interests, but is using them as pressure to tidy up a diplomatic mess of its own making. As much as Israeli officials may desire the additional hardware, particularly in light of the growing threat of a nuclear-armed Iran, they will no doubt think long and hard before setting this precedent.

Obama's promise not to seek another construction freeze after the next 90-day moratorium also suggests that his administration has yet to diagnose correctly what ails its Middle East peacemaking efforts. An agreement for a freeze, with an allowance for "inward" growth of existing settlements, was reached between former President George W. Bush and former Israeli prime ministers Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert. The Bush administration was quick to protest when that understanding was violated -- a reaction that sometimes led to tension between the two countries.

The interest in stopping construction in settlements that would make final status talks harder is not what differentiates the Bush and Obama administrations. Rather, it is the public and strident manner in which the Obama administration has conveyed U.S. demands, and its neglect of Israeli political realities. The Obama administration

has sought a total freeze as a precondition for negotiations; what is needed instead is a return to the agreements reached in previous years, which the Obama team ignored in its "anything but Bush" phase.

Obama's departures from sensible policy would be easier for him to defend if the return were sufficient. But the premise of the U.S. offer -- that within 90 days the Israelis and Palestinians can conclude a preliminary agreement on borders, rendering the settlement issue moot -- beggars belief.

To be sure, a proposal on borders could probably be ginned up in 90 minutes, never mind 90 days. A quick Google search will yield a handful of ideas, all theoretically plausible. But even armed with a sheaf of maps, a standalone border agreement is a mirage. For Israelis, more important than where the border lies is what lies beyond it -- what security arrangements will be put in place to prevent a barrage of rockets originating from the West Bank, as they now do from Gaza? What will stop Hamas from trouncing the Palestinian Authority there as well, once Israeli troops withdraw? For Palestinians, the border in which they are most interested, but which will reportedly not be addressed during the period of the freeze, is that surrounding Jerusalem. Avoiding Jerusalem is impossible in any discussion of borders, given that its limits, as defined by Israel, make up a significant portion of the border between the West Bank and Israel proper, and envelop lands that the Palestinians desire for their future state.

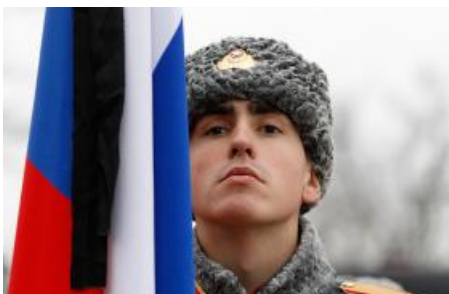
These issues are intimately connected to that of borders, and solutions to them cannot be reached in isolation from the others. Tradeoffs and connections between them are necessary, not only for the normal give-and-take that accompanies any negotiation, but also because resolving these issues is vital to crafting a sustainable accord that brings permanent peace rather than fleeting diplomatic success.

With this latest gambit, the United States is trying to rescue a policy that is not worth rescuing. Rather than heading back to the region to offer up this package, Obama needs to head back to the drawing board.

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