

# Washington:

## Let Them Talk It Out

Sep 25, 2010



Articles & Testimony

**S**unday's expiration of Israel's settlement construction moratorium is looming ever larger, and was put back on the front pages by President Barack Obama's unequivocal statement on Thursday, in his U.N. General Assembly speech dominated by the Israeli-Palestinian issue, in which he stated he "believe(s) the moratorium should be extended."

In returning forcefully to this issue in a high-profile venue, Obama risks repeating his administration's past diplomatic errors. Recall that it was Washington's -- not the Palestinians' -- early preoccupation with settlements that metastasized into a precondition delaying peace talks in 2009 and early 2010. The American (re)emphasis on it now decreases the chance of a compromise which will allow the talks to continue unimpeded.

Commenting on the settlements impasse, a State Department spokesman said on Thursday that, "You have stated positions on both sides that are incompatible." But an inspection of Israeli and Palestinian leaders' recent statements suggests that this is not necessarily the case. A senior Israeli official told AFP that "Israel is prepared to reach a compromise acceptable to all parties to consider extending the freeze on construction, provided that the freeze will not be total," echoing similar comments made Israeli PM Netanyahu which suggested an openness to compromise. PA President Abbas also hinted at flexibility recently, stating "I cannot say I will leave the negotiations, but it's very difficult for me to resume talks if Prime Minister Netanyahu declares that he will continue his (settlement) activity in the West Bank and Jerusalem."

In light of these statements, it is the U.S. public insistence on an extension of a freeze that seems overly rigid, rather than the parties' own stances. One could argue that the president's position is just rhetorical, and that in fact U.S. negotiators are working behind the scenes to broker a compromise (which it seems they are). Be this as it may, unequivocal and ultimately unnecessary public proclamations -- especially when uttered by top U.S. officials -- make those private efforts more difficult. For Netanyahu, any compromise will now seem to be the result of U.S. and international pressure, which will add fuel to the inevitable political attacks he will face from his right. For Abbas, openness to compromise makes him appear less committed on this sensitive issue than even the United States, reducing his room to maneuver.

The smartest approach for the United States to adopt now is quiet diplomacy. Past settlements compromises have bought room for negotiations, and there are various formulas available to the parties now for a workable outcome. With both the Israelis and Palestinians apparently interested in continuing with the talks for now, behind-the-scenes efforts may pay off if Washington plays its cards right and defers its public statements. Success, if it comes, will speak for itself.

Michael Singh is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute and former senior director for Middle East affairs at the National Security Council. ❖

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