

## Three Temptations on the Road to Mideast Peace

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Articles & Testimony

**A**fter 19 months, President Barack Obama has finally convened Arab-Israeli peace talks and set a one-year timeline for securing a final peace deal. If he is serious about this goal, he will need to establish a regional environment conducive to peace -- a step that requires rebuilding American strength in the region.

Historically, the United States has made its most significant progress in Middle East peacemaking when it operated from a pre-eminent position in the region. That's what convinced Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to chuck the Soviets and turn to Washington to engineer his peace with Israel in the 1970s; it is also what convinced Arabs and Israelis to start the modern era of peacemaking at the Madrid peace conference, following the U.S.-led liberation of Kuwait.

But this iteration of peace talks, which will resume on Sept. 14 in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, begins with many in the Middle East questioning American strength, not deferring to it. This change has potentially negative implications for our ability to help Arabs and Israelis forge peace.

Consider the contrast between the two presidents who pivoted from war-fighting in the Persian Gulf to peacemaking in the Levant. Twenty years ago, President George H.W. Bush built upon victory over Iraq in an internationally sanctioned war to organize the first all-Arab peace conference with Israel in Madrid. Yet even with the wind at his sails from a clear military success, Madrid produced no peace agreements and left little lasting imprint on the region's politics.

In contrast, Obama turned to Arab-Israeli peacemaking 36 hours after declaring the "end of combat operations in Iraq" -- a somewhat less glorious achievement than the first Gulf War. The decision to depart Iraq without even an Iraqi government in place may have been politically necessary in the U.S. domestic context, but it projects the air of retreat and irresolution throughout the region. If clear victory in the Kuwait war only gave the United States enough oomph to get the parties to the table, then what are the chances that the uncertain outcome in the Iraq war will empower us to help them cross the finish line?

The fact is that Obama has entered the fray of Arab-Israeli diplomacy with a weak hand, but it is not necessarily a losing one. If he handles the current negotiations more wisely than his first year and a half of Mideast diplomacy and rebuilds a sense of U.S. strength by dealing resolutely with the approaching crisis point over Iran's nuclear program, he can reverse this dynamic. To do so, however, he will need to resist three alluring temptations.

First, the president will need to keep his eye on the strategic prize -- a new Israeli-Palestinian agreement to replace the moribund Oslo Accords -- and not let irritants detour him from this path.

One such irritant could occur before the end of September, when Israeli domestic politics may compel its government to replace the current moratorium on West Bank settlement construction with something less categorical. In a meeting with Western diplomats on Sept. 12, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hinted that, though the freeze will not be extended, construction will continue at a much-reduced pace. The actual number of new homes likely to be built over the next 12 months will probably be tiny, but the decision to start building again

will be powerfully symbolic, for Israelis and Palestinians alike.

If this moment comes, the president needs to resist the temptation -- to which he and his advisors succumbed on multiple occasions in their earlier forays into Mideast diplomacy -- to inflate the significance of settlement construction, to chastise Israeli action as an insurmountable obstacle to peace, and, by their actions, to deny the Palestinians any room for flexibility on the issue. When U.S. officials, like Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, declared that "not one more brick" for construction of Israeli settlements would be acceptable, it forced Palestinians to accept no less and pushed Israelis into a corner. The result was no peace talks, no diplomacy, and no progress toward peace. As satisfying as this course may be to some in the administration, if the president reverts to this behavior, the result will be to abort the current peace initiative.

A far wiser strategy is to focus on the potential to make headway on the fundamental issues under discussion -- like the eventual borders and sovereign powers of a Palestinian state -- and to insulate the negotiations from a possible shift in Israeli settlement policy. This includes engaging with Palestinians now to ensure that talks proceed even under a strained environment. After all, if talks eventually produce a breakthrough, no one will remember the episode, and if talks eventually fail, there will be ample opportunity for the administration to rethink its policy. To its credit, the Obama administration has reportedly begun to adopt this more strategic approach, including warning Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas that the Palestinians would bear a heavy cost by withdrawing from negotiations in the event the moratorium is not extended.

Obama's second test is to find the right balance between injecting urgency into the diplomacy while disabusing both parties of the commonly held belief that he wants a deal more than they do. This is likely to come to a head after the U.S. midterm elections in November, when domestic politics diminishes as a perceived factor in the administration's Middle East policy. That is when Palestinian negotiators can be expected to challenge Obama's mettle via the eminently predictable -- and, from a Palestinian perspective, perfectly reasonable -- gambit of hardening their bargaining positions in talks with Israel.

Their goal will be to entice Washington to put its own proposals on the table rather than risk diplomatic collapse and political failure. By doing so, however, Obama would transform the diplomacy into a U.S.-Israeli negotiation, relieving the Palestinians of having to engage in the business of bargaining.

Just as with a change in Israeli settlement policy, this Palestinian brinkmanship will also provide the president with temptations he needs to resist. There may come a time when U.S. proposals could play a helpful role in bridging critical gaps, but that moment will only come after the two sides have already gone a long way toward achieving a breakthrough.

Timing is everything. Israelis have always viewed peacemaking as a transformative, not just a transactional, process. The very act of participating with Arab parties in a good-faith negotiations process, in which they see Arab negotiators jettison some longstanding positions for the sake of an agreement, is a powerful lubricant for Israel's own territorial concessions. If a U.S. president intervenes prematurely to relieve the Palestinians of the duty to engage fully in the vital act of negotiation, then it suggests the Palestinians are not ready for the compromises a real agreement would demand. Israel would likely prefer to risk a face-off with its U.S. patron rather than cede irretrievable assets to an uncertain partner. In other words, if Washington succumbs to the Palestinian gambit and intervenes too early to save the talks, chances are likely it will kill them.

If Obama handles these two tests properly, he will begin to earn appreciation among Israelis and respect among Arabs -- qualities that are in short supply among both groups. But the real test of whether the president can make progress toward clinching a deal is whether he uses the next year to bring clarity to the regional challenge that poses the most serious consequences for Middle East security and the overall U.S. position in the region: Iran's pursuit of a

nuclear weapon.

To his credit, the president seems to have abandoned the loopy thesis that Arab-Israeli peace is a prerequisite for resolving the Iranian nuclear problem. But dropping a bad idea is not a strategy. Defining a strategy begins with internalizing the fact that Iran's shadow already looms large over the Middle East and that, with a nuclear umbrella, it will loom larger still. It means recognizing that both Israel and the Palestinian Authority are less likely to take proverbial "risks for peace" when an ascendant Iran is able to withstand U.S.-led sanctions and persist with its nuclear weapons program. And it means accepting the reality that the growth of Iran's influence in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip means that it is less likely that Arabs and Israelis are both able to live with a nuclear-armed Iran and live at peace with each other.

If the president is truly committed to a historic peace, he will need to recognize that stopping Iran's nuclear march is an American interest and doing so is an American responsibility. That means resisting the temptation to let Israel address this problem on its own or, even worse, compelling Israel to accept U.S. strategic guarantees and acquiesce to a nuclear-armed Iran. Both of these outcomes involve shirking U.S. commitments to prevent Iran's nuclear progress and would damage broader U.S. interests, including the ability to broker Arab-Israeli peace. They would also likely convince Israel that it is better off keeping whatever tangible assets it currently has -- such as territory -- rather than rely on the intangibles of American guarantees. The Arab parties, meanwhile, would only grow to believe that the United States only knows how to make commitments, not to fulfill them.

In recent months, the president's Iran policy has certainly moved in the right direction. He deserves applause for pushing through sets of mutually reinforcing sanctions regimes, which seem to have had some impact inside Tehran.

But few experts believe that sanctions, as creatively designed as they may be, will bite hard enough to compel Iran to suspend its march toward a military nuclear capability. That leaves U.S. military power as the last repository of credibility for the claim, stated frequently by the president and his advisors, that the United States is committed to preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

Time and again, senior U.S. officials have said that the military option is "on the table." Nevertheless, the president has had great difficulty convincing his listeners -- at home, abroad, and, most importantly, in Iran -- that he is serious about a strategy of prevention.

This is partially the result of the way U.S. troops left Iraq, with a political vacuum in their wake. It is also the result of ambivalent statements by senior U.S. officials, suggesting that military action against Iran's nuclear weapons program may be as destabilizing as an Iranian bomb itself. And some of it is the result of the administration's reluctance to take forceful measures now, before Iran gets the bomb, to stop what U.S. generals say are Iran's current efforts to kill Americans in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Taken together, the outcome is that American strength in the Middle East -- which is only potent if it is perceived as such -- has been sorely damaged, with negative repercussions for U.S. interests around the region, including the pursuit of Arab-Israeli peace. Dispatching more troops to fight in faraway Afghanistan, as important as that may be, does not remedy this problem. Only clarity on the Iranian nuclear issue can do that. With all its messy implications, U.S. action to prevent Iran's march toward a nuclear weapons capability would buoy America's friends and undermine its adversaries from Morocco through the Persian Gulf. It alone would create a regional environment conducive to historic progress in Arab-Israeli peace.

Over the next 12 months, the president has a window of opportunity to be a real change-agent in the Middle East. If he shows strategic vision in differentiating between irritants and real obstacles to progress, if he withstands the pressures to intervene prematurely at the first sign of impasse, and if he fulfills America's traditional responsibility

to reduce the risks of peacemaking by projecting strength and resolution on the Iran nuclear challenge, then maybe - just maybe -- an elusive Arab-Israeli peace can be achieved on his watch.

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