

First Test for Peace Talks Coming Soon

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Articles & Testimony

Despite the optimistic tone struck over the past few days by U.S., Israeli, and Palestinian leaders, the latest round of direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians already faces a looming crisis. On Sept. 26, the ten-month moratorium on settlement activity decreed by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will expire. Netanyahu has stated that he will not renew the moratorium, while Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has asserted that Palestinians will walk out of the talks unless he does just that.

The Sept. 26 deadline is the legacy of the Obama administration's early emphasis on the settlements issue. Washington demanded a freeze to all settlement activity, including "natural growth," which prompted Abbas to take up the same demand. Netanyahu steadfastly refused, finally agreeing to a temporary moratorium to prevent a crisis in U.S.-Israel relations. If history is any guide, it is likely that, had Washington not chosen to focus so singularly on settlements, they would have remained a matter of great contention, but not an insuperable obstacle to negotiations.

Either an extension or the expiration of the moratorium on Sept. 26 has potentially disastrous consequences for the peace talks. If Netanyahu allows the freeze to expire, the talks will collapse. If he extends the moratorium, his coalition may well collapse, resulting in political paralysis in Israel for at least several months.

As any good diplomat knows, when faced with two bad options, the only thing to do is come up with more options. The looming crisis over settlements provides Washington with its first test as mediator, and it has a responsibility to devise a creative way to provide the parties with an exit from the settlement conundrum -- so that they can focus on negotiations, which in the long run offer the only hope of a durable solution to the dispute.

One possibility which merits consideration is for the Obama administration to reaffirm the relevant portions of President Bush's April 14, 2004, letter to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. The letter made plain two realities which the parties themselves have difficulty acknowledging publicly: first, that Israel would likely retain certain settlement blocs near the Green Line in any peace agreement, and second, that the future Palestinian state must be "viable" and "contiguous," implying that Israel would have to quit many settlements whose retention would thwart such an outcome.

These statements addressed vital concerns on both sides -- the Israeli concern about uprooting the bulk of its settlement population, and the Palestinian concern that continued settlement activity would eat away at their future state and leave it as a patchwork of disconnected cantons. Crucially, these reassurances and subsequent understandings paved the way for a modus vivendi (albeit a temporary one) on the settlement issue which allowed negotiations to proceed.

Washington's reaffirmation [of] the April 14 letter would remove the pressure on both Netanyahu and Abbas to take stands on Sept. 26 which would lead to the collapse of peace talks, with all of the negative consequences that would imply. Essentially, the U.S. would shoulder blame that might otherwise be directed at the two leaders by their allies and domestic constituencies.

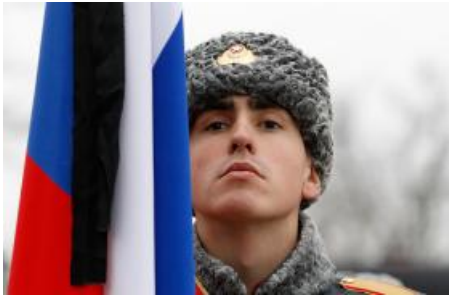
Whether they like it or not, President Obama, Prime Minister Netanyahu, and President Abbas are now in these

peace talks together, and each has an incentive to bolster the others for the sake of his own political fortunes. Preventing a crisis on Sept. 26 will be the first test of their willingness and ability to do so.

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