

Time Running Out on Clinton Proposals

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Brief Analysis

Meetings this week between Israeli and Palestinian security and political personnel notwithstanding, time has virtually run out for any Israeli–Palestinian peace deal. It is important to note that the issue is not just one of time, even though President Clinton leaves office next Saturday. Top Clinton Administration officials have made clear that the Palestinians have engaged in "delays" since the December 23 ideas were tabled. Seeking to avoid the international disapproval that mushroomed in the wake of last summer's failed Camp David summit, Yasir Arafat came to Washington with an apparent "yes, but" view of the proposals. However, this approach seems clearly to be little more than a public-relations tactic.

While the Israeli government said that it accepted the Clinton parameters, Palestinian negotiator Ahmed Queria (also known as Abu Ala) has made it clear that the Palestinians reject them outright and Arafat's letter to Clinton also undermines the hope for compromise. On its web site, Arafat's Fatah Party lists "forty-four reasons why it objects to the proposals." If the Clinton Administration's proposals are not accepted, it will mark the fourth time in a period of ten months that a high-level personal gambit by Clinton on the Middle East has failed, at least in the short term. The other three unsuccessful interventions took place at the Geneva summit last March with Hafiz al-Asad, in pursuit of an Israel–Syria peace accord; the Camp David summit last July, between Israelis and Palestinians; and the quadripartite Sharm el-Sheikh summit in October that failed to halt the intifada violence.

The outcome of this round is, as of yet, undecided. What is certain is that the scope of President Clinton's new proposals are sweeping, taking positions on issues that the United States has studiously avoided in the past. If it has an analogue, it is the Rogers Plan of 1969. That plan, named after Secretary of State William Rogers, called on Israel to withdraw to the 1967 border with "minor modifications." To be sure, Clinton's effort is the most detailed American approach to the future of the West Bank by an American president since Jimmy Carter was involved in drafting Camp David I, and marks the first time since the Reagan Plan that an American president has put his name on an American peace initiative.

In his January 7 speech in New York, Clinton said he had an obligation to put forward these ideas, not only in response to the request of the parties, but on account of what he considered his best judgments after eight years of listening to the parties. This speech marked the first time Clinton went public with his December 23 oral proposals that he posed to negotiators at the White House to bridge differences between the two sides. In some ways, the plan seems to demonstrate the president's pessimism that the parties could ever work out terms on their own, given the difficulties of the last seven years. Moreover, Clinton has made clear his view that the Israeli–Palestinian situation will only deteriorate and adversely effect the region if not treated.

In his remarks, Clinton went on to express confidence that his proposals would be the basis of any deal in the future. "Those who believe that my ideas can be altered to one party's exclusive benefit are mistaken . . . If they can come up with a completely different agreement, it would suit me just fine. But I doubt it." These comments represent a departure from his view on December 23 – when addressing Israeli and Palestinians negotiators – that, "these are my ideas; if they are not accepted, they are not just off the table, they also go with me when I leave office." Nowhere

in his New York speech did the president qualify his remarks as personal, and not U.S. policy, as he did privately on December 23 and in the original text of his speech.

Some critics charge that the Clinton proposals were designed to at least foist his proposals on both a new Bush Administration and perhaps even on a new government in Israel. Critics also charge that the proposals could be used by the Palestinians as a point of departure — a baseline to extract future concessions, and a mechanism to prevent the incoming Bush Administration from disavowing proposals offered by Clinton. In short, since the Barak government has offered provisional consent, critics fear that the Clinton proposals will bind Israeli negotiators in the future, without locking the Palestinians into any reciprocal compromises. As such, critics wonder why Israel would endorse a document that has not been accepted by the other side.

In his speech, Clinton did not publicly articulate all of his proposals. For example, he omitted any mention of his proposals to yield 94 to 96 percent of West Bank as well as any mention of plans for Palestinian sovereignty on the Temple Mount. He did not refer to the Temple Mount in the speech, only to the Arab term for this for this area — Haram al-Sharif.

It is important to note some of these key shifts in thinking. Many have appeared in press reports over the last several months, but many have never been the subject of American "on-the-record" statements. Here are a few examples:

Palestinian statehood: "There can be no genuine resolution to the conflict without a sovereign, viable, Palestinian state that accommodates Israel's security requirements and the demographic realities."

Two capitals in Jerusalem: "Jerusalem should be the internationally recognized capital of two states, Israel and Palestine." [And on the ground in Jerusalem] "What is Arab should be Palestinian, for why would Israel want to govern in perpetuity the lives of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians?" He made clear that the United States should set up two embassies in Jerusalem — one to Israel and one to a future Palestinian state.

Settlement blocs and land swaps: "Settlement blocks . . . minimizing the land annexed [and] including as few Palestinians as possible . . ." Clinton also suggested trading land inside sovereign 1967 borders for settlement blocs: "To make the agreement durable, I think there will have to be some territorial swaps and other arrangements."

No quantitative or qualitative limits on immigration to Palestine: "All Palestinian refugees who wish to live in this [Palestinian state] should have the right to do so."

Israel as an option for Palestinian refugees: "All refugees who want to find new homes . . . in third countries, should be able to do so, consistent with those countries sovereign decisions. And that includes Israel . . . if the government of Israel offers the Palestinians a home . . . but that cannot undermine the very foundations of the Israeli state or the whole reason for creating the Palestinian state."

Replacing Israeli control of the Jordan Valley with an International Force: "My parameters rely on an international presence in Palestine to provide border security along the Jordan Valley and to monitor implementation of the final agreement." (There is no mention of bilateral or trilateral security cooperation with the Palestinians and Jordan.)

It should be pointed out that Clinton's remarks contained some of the harshest condemnation of practices on both sides. On the Palestinian side, he called for ending what he called a "culture of violence and culture of incitement." He juxtaposed this against the charge that the Israeli "settlement enterprise and bypass roads" in areas destined to be Palestine, "is inconsistent with the Oslo commitment that both sides negotiate a compromise."

Palestinian Opposition to the Clinton Proposals If one looks at the statements of top Palestinian officials and adds to that a letter that Arafat wrote to Clinton in his response to his December 23 proposals (as published by the Palestinian daily al-Quds), there is little doubt that Arafat has rejected the core compromises of the Clinton proposals. (This is exacerbated when one reads the web page of Palestinian negotiators who itemize close to twenty

objections, and the communiqué of Fatah that puts forward forty-four reasons why it rejects the Clinton ideas.) The Clinton proposal gives the Palestinians sovereignty over the compound on top of Jerusalem's Temple Mount, rejecting previous ideas of shared sovereignty, despite the fact that the site is holy to both. Yet, the Palestinians chose to protest Israeli control alongside Judaism's sacred Western Wall. Despite the fact that Clinton went beyond Camp David II and was the first U.S. president who offered Palestinians sovereignty over all the Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem, the Palestinians chose to focus instead on what they termed to be insufficient geographic links between Arab neighborhoods. When Clinton discussed the Palestinians gaining the strategic Jordan Valley that has served as Israel's eastern security frontier where Iraq attacked Israel in the past, the Palestinians contested the phase-in period from six years and insisted that it occur in a few months. In all these cases, sweeping American and potential Israeli concessions were met with a Palestinian desire to pocket more. On top of all this, Arafat secured support of Arab countries last week to keep demanding that Israel let in over three million Palestinian refugees, even though this is tantamount to demographic suicide for Israel and viewed as such by much of the world.

According to the Palestinian daily al-Quds, which published this week a text of a letter that Arafat wrote Clinton in the aftermath of the December 23 proposals, there are other objections as well. For example they are not willing to accept any provision for emergency Israeli deployment in the Jordan Valley during crisis. In addition, the Palestinians refuse to permit restrictions on their airspace and insist on extra-territorial links between Gaza and the West Bank. They even suggest that an "end of conflict" is only possible once there is peace with between Israel and its other Arab neighbors, Syria and Lebanon.

If Arafat wanted to galvanize existing international support (UN, Europe, and Russia, who have been sympathetic to the Palestinian cause) for the Clinton plan in order to persuade his own public, he could have tried. Unfortunately, keeping with his "leading by following" approach — refusing to say blunt truths to his own people — he did not. Partly this refusal is consistent with his engendering high expectations among his own people and then being boxed in by them. And it seems to have worked. According to a Bir Zeit poll in November, 92 percent of Palestinians believe there can be no peace deal without the right of return. For Arafat, there may be another factor as well — namely, his belief that the incoming Bush Administration will not seek a warm embrace with Israel, and may provide him with even better terms.

Israeli Reaction to the Clinton Proposals Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak was even willing to forge ahead despite suffering the defections last week of Israeli government branches that are deemed non-political: the attorney-general and military chief of staff. Barak hoped a deal could lift his languishing electoral fortunes for the February 6 vote. (So far, Barak is resisting growing calls that he bow out of the race in favor of rival Shimon Peres, who according to Israel Television polls slightly ahead of MK Ariel Sharon, but within the margin of error.) But it now seems that the more people know about the proposals, the lower his prospects at the polls sink, with Sharon holding a commanding nineteen point lead in this upcoming weekend poll, according to Israel Television. In short, the proposals are part of the political problem, and not part of the solution. Many Israelis see the division of Jerusalem and cession of sovereignty on the Temple Mount as taking the Zion out of Zionism. According to polls, 61 percent of Israelis do not believe Barak has the mandate to negotiate, given his capacity as caretaker of a minority government, while 57 percent believe his motivation is in not the good of the country but his desire to be re-elected. However, Barak strenuously denies this, noting that he forfeited a unity government with Sharon on several occasions — including as late as November — amid hopes that a comprehensive peace deal was still in the offing.

Yet, what has clearly hurt the prime minister most of all is the toll of the ongoing violence. Unlike the post-Camp David period, the public now sees any deal with the Palestinians as creating the territorial baseline for the next round of violence. The hope of the end of the conflict was the prize that was worth the steep price of concessions. However, if the public does not believe that the conflict is on the verge of resolution, then paying the price seems futile. In

short, Israelis seem to believe that the Clinton proposals cannot be separated from the overall environment. Given what they see is blood, enmity, and broken promises, many Israelis are finding it hard to believe that the conflict is on the verge of resolution. For the Clinton proposals to work, Israelis need to believe that this ultimate land for peace deal will indeed yield an end of conflict peace, and will not create a new threshold of vulnerability literally on their doorstep.

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