

In the Middle East, Money and Bear Hugs Only Go So Far

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When Mideast peace talks convene at Camp David on Tuesday, President Clinton will need to bring more to the table--from members of Congress to carrots, from senators to sticks--than he has so far brought to Arab-Israeli peacemaking.

With "Camp David II," the United States begins a journey into unknown Mideast waters. The half-century since Israel's founding can be divided into two: the first 25 years or so, characterized by consistent violence and intermittent bouts of peacemaking, and the second 25 years or so, marked by consistent peacemaking with intermittent bouts of violence. The difference is real and largely due to a U.S. strategy that rejected the search for an all-or-nothing "comprehensive" peace in favor of a step-by-step, gradualist approach.

Gradualism, however, seems to have run its course. The stated goal of this summit is to "reach an agreement on the core issues that have fueled a half-century of conflict." Anything less than an end-of-the-conflict accord will not merit the sort of Israeli concessions that the Barak government is reportedly putting on the table, including an offer to withdraw from 90% or more of the disputed territories. And anything less than an end to the conflict almost surely will be rejected by the Israeli people when an agreement comes to national referendum.

To achieve that goal, Clinton will need to improve on what actually has been a less-than-stellar record on Mideast diplomacy. Both the 1993 Oslo accords and the 1994 Jordan-Israel peace treaty were locally produced deals, not made-in-America. The 1998 Wye Plantation agreement was a major achievement, but it led, within days, to the downfall of the Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu, which, cynics will say, was Clinton's objective all along. It is certainly not a model Ehud Barak wants to emulate.

As for the Syrian front, Clinton met the late President Hafez Assad as many times as all previous U.S. presidents combined, yet still has nothing to show for his efforts. While Clinton has an impressive mastery of the issues, a flair for timely and emotive symbolism and an indefatigable will to persevere, Camp David will be about salvaging a legacy, not safeguarding it.

Ending the Palestinian-Israeli conflict can only be achieved through a new and different type of presidential effort.

At the Madrid peace conference, which launched this process in 1991, President Bush called for "territorial compromise" as the path to peace. If the reputed Israeli offer of vast concessions in terms of territory, Jerusalem and

sovereign powers to a future Palestinian state are accurate, then what is left is to elicit from Yasser Arafat his contribution toward this "territorial compromise."

In practical terms, this means a Palestinian concession to accept less than 100% in exchange for a renunciation of all outstanding claims on Israel. Achieving that breakthrough will require an uncharacteristic approach to Mideast diplomacy.

First, Clinton will need to make Congress a full partner in these negotiations. U.S., Arab and Israeli diplomats all privately talk of a major aid package as a way to induce concessions, a \$75-billion to \$100-billion global effort that would include \$1 billion to \$2 billion per year of U.S. assistance for the next two decades to help pay for refugee resettlement, Israeli security expenses and support to the new Palestinian state. Even in this era of surpluses, no Republican-controlled Congress is going to meekly acquiesce to the promise-making of a lame-duck president without a stake in the effort.

Bringing the congressional leadership to Camp David would be a smart way to start this process.

Second, Clinton will need to brandish sticks as well as carrots. Even in the Middle East, money and bear hugs can only go so far. Arafat is only likely to accept an Israeli offer--no matter how generous--if the alternative is too painful to contemplate. To make credible his assessment that peace means that "neither side can achieve 100% of its goals," Clinton must tell Arafat that the United States will never recognize a Palestinian declaration of independence made outside the negotiation process, that such an act would trigger the termination of all U.S. aid and that the U.S. would view with sympathy an Israeli decision to annex limited areas of the West Bank in response.

Third, Clinton will need to know when a lesser deal is better than a bad deal. Of the three leaders at the summit, Arafat is the one most able to leave Camp David without an agreement. After all, six months hence, Clinton will be out of the White House, Barak will probably be facing a fallen government and a new election, but Arafat will still be head of the PLO. If Clinton wants to avoid a situation in which Arafat's brinkmanship leads to a faulty agreement that brings down another Israeli government, he must be ready, if necessary, to push for a lesser deal that demands lesser Israeli concessions.

In effect, this would mean a statesmanlike return to a policy of gradualism, leaving the parties with enough chits to come to the bargaining table another day, when the circumstances are more ripe for success. This second-best ending would still earn Clinton the legacy of peacemaker--one whose efforts left open the option of further diplomacy as an alternative to conflict.



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