

Is Obama Charting a New Mideast Peace Course?

Now that the United States has [officially abandoned its attempt](#) to convince Israel to stop building settlements for just a little while, please?, everyone is waiting for Plan B. Those who still hope for a peaceful resolution to the Middle East conflict are hoping that the Plan B will [include an American assertion of its positions](#), at least on the matter of borders.

Well, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton was supposed to present Plan B on December 10 at the Saban Center of the Brookings Institute in Washington. But while her speech [was more even-handed](#) than what we've gotten used to, it was too short on specifics to be said to really mark a new direction. She reinforced the US commitment to Israeli security and the two-state solution and claims that, through renewed shuttle diplomacy, the US would facilitate continued negotiations that are purported to tackle all of the core issues.

The familiarity of her statements cannot but breed contempt, but there were a few hopeful signs:

The first being the Israelis in attendance—Defense Minister [Ehud Barak](#) and opposition leader [Tzipi Livni](#), the two most prominent leaders vying for Benjamin Netanyahu's job, represented Israel. That can easily be interpreted as a public American recognition that the current Israeli government, and its leader, is not interested in peace, which is, of course, true. There was also the clearest endorsement yet for the [Arab Peace Initiative](#), and for the most part, Clinton put more than the usual onus on Israel.

Still, the Obama administration continues to repeat the mantra:

"...negotiations between the parties is the only path that will succeed in securing their respective aspirations."

It is, of course, true that there are details that must be worked out between Israelis and Palestinians, but if there is one myth that the Obama administration has shown the emptiness of, it is this holy grail of bilateral negotiations. It is time we examine the assumptions that underlie that axiom.

Negotiations as Give-and-Take

Any negotiation requires compromise, and each side wants, quite naturally, to get something for what they are giving. This is true whether the talks are between equals or between parties of greatly disproportionate power, as is the case between Israel and the Palestinians. But what do the Palestinians have to offer Israel?

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) has long ago conceded 78% of historic Palestine and confined its claims to the remaining 22%. The Palestinian Authority has worked tirelessly with the United States and Jordan to develop its security force, a force which, while it does contribute to maintaining "order" in the West Bank, sees its primary function as preventing attacks on Israelis on both sides of the Green Line, a task at which it has proven remarkably effective. This last is one of the few points on which there is [unanimity among](#) American, European, Israeli and Palestinian

spokespeople.

The problem arises because the Palestinians don't get credit for these concessions. Negotiations start over, and each side wants to "get." What they already have generally doesn't enter into it. Israel has what it has, and, while it is easy to simply fault the Palestinians for giving while getting nothing in return, such complaints do nothing to move the parties out of the current stalemate.

Incentives For Politically Difficult Decisions

It's hardly news that Israeli public opinion has [shifted rightward](#). Far from understanding how much the Palestinians have already conceded, many, if not most, Israelis see only their own concessions, in the form of withdrawals, and the perception that it has brought them little benefit. They see rockets from Gaza, instability on their northern border, and a cold peace with Egypt as being the result of withdrawals from Gaza, Southern Lebanon and Sinai, respectively.

So, while Israelis continue to support an end to occupation and a two-state solution, the actual steps toward that, let alone the endgame, remain a political minefield in Israel. Sure, people want peace, but in order to build support for concessions on difficult issues such as abandoning large settlements like Ariel or Ma'ale Adumim, sharing Jerusalem, and coming to some reasonable solution to the refugee issue (all of which, at this time, would be supported by only a distinct minority in Israel), there must be incentives.

In the past two decades, such incentives have been systematically eliminated. With the signing of the Oslo Accords, a process began that severely lowered the cost of the occupation for Israel while, simultaneously, Israel expanded and entrenched that occupation. International financial support for the Palestinian Authority (mostly from the United States and Europe, as Arab support has been more pledge than payment) has relieved Israel of much of the financial burden of occupying 4-5 million Palestinians.

The initial warming toward Israel that followed Oslo also opened up new markets all over the globe and, while some of those have slowed, much of that gain remains in Israel's pocket, even today.

For most Israelis, and certainly for its government, ending the occupation means significant risk. Whether the risk is physical, as many Israelis fear, or political, as the leadership fears, it is risk all the same. There needs to be a reason for Israel to take the risk.

Right now, there just isn't enough reason. Israel's economy is doing better than most Western countries, and, despite the hysteria around Iran, it has not faced a real threat to its physical existence in almost four decades. Idealistic arguments about peace, the moral corruption of the occupation and Israel's public image are not going to be enough. There needs to be a downside to maintaining the occupation that is serious enough for Israel to make difficult and (in their view) dangerous concessions. That is the thinking underlying the BDS movement (that movement, for many reasons, has [no hope whatsoever](#) of creating the sort of consequences we're talking about here, but the more positive branches of it have already done [much to move the political zeitgeist](#) away from the black-and-white, Israel-good-Arabs-bad view that has permeated Western, and especially American thinking for so long).

Is Obama Embracing More Realistic Tactics?

Once again, the peace community is, rightly, urging Obama to [back his words](#)

[up with firm action](#) to push Israel toward peace. But, realistically, it's hard to see how that is possible. Obama was not able to muster the political will to do that when his party controlled both houses of Congress and he had at least some support from such mainstream pro-Israel figures as Howard Berman and Gary Ackerman.

Now, he is facing a split Congress, and Republicans will [move Ileana Ros-Lehtinen](#) into the Chair of the House Committee on Foreign Relations, while Jewish Republican [Eric Cantor](#) will become House Majority Leader. Even worse, the ongoing shuffle in Obama's own inner circle has seen [General Jim Jones](#), perhaps the strongest voice for concerted American action on peace, depart while [Dennis Ross](#), who has been correctly called "Israel's lawyer" regain a central position in American policy formation on the Middle East.

Yet, some hope is surfacing. One very hopeful sign is a report in the Guardian, UK regarding a letter sent to the European Union leadership [from twenty-six former EU dignitaries](#), including the previous president, Javier Solana. The letter urged that the EU take some very dramatic steps to push a two-state solution forward quickly before it dies completely.

But the notable piece of the report [in the Guardian](#) was this paragraph: "The letter says the group had received "signals" from US officials that the best way to help American efforts to reach a peace deal was to put a "price tag" on policies that contradict those advocated by Barack Obama."

If indeed that is the case, it represents a real break from the norm of America's Middle East dealings, and a pretty impressive bow to reality by Obama. The Guardian is the only place I've seen this particular detail, so we can't be certain of its veracity. But this would be a very wise move on Obama's part.

The US has always lobbied in Europe to keep the EU on the periphery of the Israel-Palestine issue. But Obama may be recognizing that if he couldn't put real pressure on Israel before, when he had a stronger political hand, it's unrealistic to hope he can now. But rather than simply accept that, he is looking for realistic alternatives.

Palestinian Strategy

A number of observers have remarked on how the current impasse actually [works to the Palestinians' benefit](#). Israel is demonstrating its lack of interest in peace while it is the Palestinians who are promoting the two-state solution, which world leaders insist is the only way to save Israel's future. That places the PA in a much more favorable light.

Their pursuit of a two-state solution has recently taken the form of requesting recognition of Palestinian statehood from a number of countries. But this act, while it aggravated people in both Israel and the US, changed nothing. In and of itself, it can't. But if the PLO also breaks with its history and decides to take assertive diplomatic action, it may find a much improved playing field.

Obama's hands may not be tied, but he is not going to bear the brunt of the political cost of taking on Israel. I think he's made that clear. But he may well be signaling that if the Palestinians and Europeans act, [they may not face the kind of American interference](#) they have in the past. That is, if enough political momentum can be built up, both in the diplomatic arena and in the domestic American one to give Obama enough room...*not* to act.

If Obama is sending that message, if his bringing in Tzipi Livni means he is willing to follow in the footsteps of Bill Clinton and start taking on Bibi and if the Palestinians governing in the West Bank are willing to take the bold steps needed there may yet be a chance to steer the situation away from the disastrous course it is currently on.

But those are a lot of ifs, and even if they do come about, the road to an end of the conflict is long and winding, and is not going to end in a few months or a year. Still, after years of a "peace process" to nowhere, some more sound strategic decisions would be most welcome.