Tiring of incrementalism

In his recent blog posting, Dan Fleshler correctly warns of the “Perils of American incrementalism” regarding the pursuit of Middle East peace. It’s worth reading.

The Israeli left, too, is beginning to despair of Obama’s tepid approach to peace-making. There is a growing feeling that the American President has failed to reach Israeli public opinion because he has yet to present a palpable peace plan that the people can “taste”. As a result, I’m informed, a great many Israelis regard Obama’s current policy as “idle talk”. Indeed, the failure to connect the settlements problem to a specific plan makes many Israelis see the US-Israel sparring over this as ‘evidence’ of Obama’s ‘bad blood’ towards Israel, rather than a logical prelude to bolder diplomatic moves.

Actually, the drawbacks of gradualism have been recognized for years. Within a year or two after the 1993 Oslo breakthrough, for example, Oslo architect Yossi Beilin was already pushing for expedited final-status talks. He recognized that, for all the confidence-building measures that the leaderships on both sides might generate, extremists on both sides would always do them one better, through acts of violence and incitement, by poisoning the air, and by continuing to create settlement facts on the ground (generally with the consent of the Israeli government).

I believe, by the way, that the American government actually understands all this. George Mitchell has already hinted at the potential ‘deal’ that the US could offer Israel: Either freeze all settlement activity at once; or reach swift agreement with the PLO on the future borders of the State of Israel and the future State of Palestine so that it becomes clear which parts of the West Bank will be incorporated – under bilateral agreement and based on land swaps – into Israel and where it will be legitimate for Israel to build.

Fleshler’s argument, by the way, can also be a double-edged sword: Focusing on the big picture of a final deal, without Israel committing to a settlement freeze, takes us back to the years between the 1991 Madrid Conference and, well, the present, in which Israel agrees to negotiate but expands the settlements at the very same time. Let us not forget the candid words of Israeli PM Yitzhak Shamir, as quoted in Maariv in 1992: “I would have carried out autonomy talks for ten years, and meanwhile we would have reached half a million people in Judea and Samaria”.

A final-status deal must be pursued vigorously and at once, but there should be no concommitant license for settlement construction to continue.