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To make peace, Obama will have to make Serious enemies

By David Ignatius

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By traveling to the heart of the Arab world on Thursday, President Barack Obama is putting himself at a crossroads: He is raising expectations that America can coax Israel and the Arabs toward a comprehensive peace that has eluded them for more than 40 years. But can Obama deliver?

Obama has chosen a very tough issue - Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank - as a test of his seriousness: He has demanded that Israel freeze these settlements, including a loophole for "natural growth," as it's called. "Settlements have to be stopped in order for us to move forward," he said last month at a joint news conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Obama is hardly the first president to oppose Israeli settlements: Every administration since the 1967 war - and that's now a total of nine - has made essentially the same demand. Netanyahu, like previous Israeli leaders, has rejected it. Which raises an agonizing post-Cairo problem for Obama: What does he do now? How does he show that his administration really means what it says?

Obama and his top aides have been debating this question for weeks. The US has various options for showing displeasure, starting with sharper public criticism of Israeli settlements policy and escalating to changes in diplomatic and military contacts, in distribution of aid and in sharing of intelligence. The US could also ban tax-deductible contributions that benefit the settlements, or issue new procurement rules to prohibit US government purchases of products made in settlements.

To get a sense of how difficult a political battle this will be, try reading the compendium of official US statements on settlements since 1967, gathered by the Foundation for Middle East

Peace. Year after year, decade after decade, American officials keep repeating US opposition to the settlements - and Israeli governments keep on building them. More than 120 settlements have been constructed over the past 42 years, and the Israeli population in the West Bank now totals 190,000 in the Jerusalem area and 289,000 elsewhere.

For years, the official US position was that the settlements were illegal under international law because they violated the Fourth Geneva Convention on protection of civilians in time of war. That document, adopted in 1949, specifies: "The Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies." The application of this article to Israel was endorsed by the administrations of Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter.

An emphatic statement of the US view that settlements were illegal came from George H.W. Bush in 1971, when he was ambassador to the United Nations: "We regret Israel's failure to acknowledge its obligations under the Fourth Geneva Convention as well as its actions which are contrary to the letter and spirit of this convention."

Israel's position was that the West Bank was not "occupied" but rather "administered" territory whose pre-1967 status had been unclear under international law. Jordan had ruled the West Bank from 1949 until 1967, but most nations hadn't recognized its sovereignty. To complicate matters further, the Israeli Supreme Court has described the West Bank as "under belligerent occupation."

President Ronald Reagan stopped the characterization of Israeli settlements as "illegal" when he took office in 1981, but he opposed expansion of them. That position has been maintained by subsequent administrations, which have termed building of new settlements "an obstacle to peace" and said that the status of existing settlements should be resolved in peace negotiations. Israel has steadfastly refused interim attempts to curtail its settlements, including announcing a specific reservation to the 2003 "road map" for peace.

What's agonizing when you read this 42-year history is that settlements have created a powerful pressure group that opposes the limitations that Obama insists are necessary. For Israeli settlers who have been living in the West Bank for a generation, this is an intensely personal issue. The same is true, obviously, for the Palestinians whose homes and farms have been displaced by the thousands of settlers.

This is the blood knot that Obama proposes to untie. He has a rare gift for seeking the middle ground - on race, on national security, even on abortion. But it will be hard to stay in the middle on this one. Obama will have to articulate US policy more clearly and emphatically than have any of his predecessors, and he will have to demonstrate that he means what he says. To make peace, he will first have to make some enemies.