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Obama's Middle East Mistakes

By Yossi Alpher

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There are plenty of reasons why the Israeli-Palestinian peace process has not yet been restarted through American mediation.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's manipulations and his coalition are one; the weakness of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) under Mahmoud Abbas are another. The moderate Arab states have done precious little to help. But right now US President Barack Obama's mistakes are the most glaring.

Obama's scheme to jump-start the process with a genuine Israeli settlement freeze and low-level Arab diplomatic gestures to Israel seemed initially like a good idea. With the PA having demonstrated real achievements with regard to security and institution-building, it made sense to demand of the other parties that they seriously fulfill their roadmap obligations (the Arab gestures are a road map phase II requirement). Besides, settlement expansion is antithetical to Netanyahu's commitment to a "Jewish state." Netanyahu's government would not have collapsed over a settlement freeze, given that its new ministers and members of Knesset had a vested interest in protecting their seats and avoiding governmental crisis.

But Obama seemed to think that he could do But Obama seemed to think that he could do the job merely through "engagement," without pressure. This corresponds with his general

approach to international politics, although it must be noted that nowhere has he “engaged” Israel at the personal and emotional level as he has the Arab and Muslim worlds. Not surprisingly, neither Netanyahu nor the moderate Arabs, under Riyadh’s lead, complied with Obama’s requests. Meanwhile the weakest player, Abbas, bought into the settlement-freeze demand enthusiastically. The Obama administration was able to adjust to Netanyahu’s stonewalling and “spin” its abandonment of the settlement freeze; this is harder for Abbas to do.

More administration mistakes have followed. Obama and US special Mideast envoy George Mitchell woke up late to the almost certain negative ramifications of possible Egyptian success in brokering a Fatah-Hamas unity deal for their plan to renew Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

If Cairo succeeds, Hamas will gain new leverage over policy-making in Ramallah, while the prospect of Palestinian elections involving Hamas could postpone any serious negotiations. Rather than wasting time in pressuring the Saudis to allow some low-level Arab diplomatic gestures to Israel, the administration should have been concentrating its energies on Cairo.

True, the administration could not have prevented the negative effects of the recent Goldstone report on war crimes allegedly committed in Gaza last January. But its attempt to persuade Abbas to bypass the report ultimately proved both abortive and detrimental to the Palestinian leader’s already weak standing.

Then there is Obama’s acceptance of the Nobel peace prize. The Middle East is the region where the Obama vision is being most energetically applied. Thus far Obama’s accomplishments here are limited: talking to Iran and beginning the withdrawal from Iraq, but getting nowhere with the Arabs and Israelis. By setting an even higher standard of success, the Nobel is liable to prove more a curse than a blessing for Obama in the Israel-Arab sphere. He could have asked to postpone the prize for a few years and gained respect in this part of the world.

Still, let us suppose that, despite these mistakes and setbacks, the administration does soon succeed in convening the Abbas and Netanyahu peace teams. It begs credibility that Obama and Mitchell don’t know what they’ll be up against. Even if Netanyahu himself is honestly prepared to seek a genuine two-state solution – and at this point this is merely an unproven supposition – his coalition is not. This means a government crisis and possible elections in Israel, especially since Netanyahu is doing nothing to cultivate Kadima’s Tzipi Livni as an alternative coalition partner. As for Abbas, whether the issue is pressure from Hamas or the PLO leader’s own refusal – as demonstrated last year to Ehud Olmert – to compromise on the core issues, he is apparently at best a partner for a deal on borders, not Jerusalem or refugees. But first he has to be persuaded to shoot for a partial agreement.

This brings us full circle back to the Obama administration’s resolve to tackle the Palestinian issue first and most energetically, rather than negotiations between Israel and Syria. True,

Damascus has proven less than fully forthcoming in complying with administration preliminary requests and “tests” regarding Iraq and other issues; here again Obama seems to be relying on “engagement” without teeth. But unlike Abbas in Ramallah, the Bashar Assad regime is fully in charge in Damascus, and it has indicated that it knows the price it will have to pay for the Golan.

In the near term, a Syria-Israel deal is a better bet for Washington – with better chances of success and a far bigger regional (Iran-related) payoff – than a Palestine-Israel deal.

This could ultimately prove very beneficial for moderate Palestinians, too. But only if Obama is tough and more focused.