

Israel - Palestine; Such is the Peace Process: Obama as a Salesman

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It wouldn't be an exaggeration to claim that the resumption of peace talks between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority have thus far yielded nothing of value, at least not as far as settling the decades-long struggle.

For one, the media has paid the talks little attention, aside from the ceremonial coverage of the first round of talks in Washington on September 2. It barely noticed the following round in the Middle East nearly two weeks later. What did capture the media's attention was US President Barack Obama's attempt to minimize the damage he invited upon himself for merely pressing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to issue a partial moratorium on settlement building (about 11 months ago), and then to extend the settlement freeze.

The President of the United States has, expectedly, failed to persuade Israeli leaders to uphold such a basic prerequisite to ensuring a smooth sailing peace process. Its resumption signaled the return of American diplomacy to the Middle East. Its current problems and expected failure, unlike previous rounds of talks, could very much usher the end of American political adventurism in the region. If a president like Obama - who once enjoyed such a massive national and international mandate - could weaken before a rightwing Israeli prime minister, then why should others even try?

To save face - and postpone failure - Obama has reportedly promised Israel broad security and diplomatic guarantees. All he has asked for in return is the mere extension of the settlement moratorium of 60 days - enough to push his party through the November elections.

According to an article by David Makovsky, of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the leaked letter from Obama to Netanyahu positions US foreign policy as a hostage to Israeli diktats, whereby the US makes no such future requests of settlement freeze, guarantees a US veto of any UN Security Council Resolution related to the peace talks for a year, agrees to increase pressure on Iran as per Israeli demands, and so on. Among the many disturbing pledges made by the Obama administration, one seems particularly generous. According to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, the US will "accept the legitimacy" of Israel's security needs as defined by the Netanyahu government, referring apparently to the Israeli leader's demand for a long-term Israeli military presence in the eastern West Bank, along the border with Jordan".

For Obama to lease his country's political influence to a foreign state for cheap political gain is bad enough. To achieve personal and party political goals at the expense of the national interest of the country is equally disturbing. But to promise a lasting military presence of an

occupying power in another people's land for a mere 60-day settlement freeze is completely unethical and illogical. Furthermore, it violates international law. This letter will someday be analyzed in the same category as the Balfour Declaration of 1917, when a Jewish Homeland was promised by Britain to a group of European Zionists in historic Palestine - even when neither group had ownership rights or any political mandate.

Obama's passionate speech in Cairo, in June 2009, was entitled 'A New Beginning'. But a year and few months later, Obama has learned the limits of the political overreach of his country when it comes to Israel - as much as the Iraq war has demonstrated the limits of military power.

With this new wisdom, Obama and his advisors are acting like desperate salesmen before a conceited, dispassionate tourist. All Obama needs is a bit of time and Netanyahu is haggling over every detail to ensure maximum value for his dollar before November 2 arrives. Then, Israel will find other ways to use whatever leverage it has to advance its interests.

Because Israeli leaders also understand that in times like this Washington is absolutely mute and meek, Tel Aviv is sparing no efforts to exploit the situation. At home, Netanyahu is flexing his muscles to impress his influential rightwing constituency by approving hundreds of new housing units in illegally occupied Arab East Jerusalem. Netanyahu has humbled the president of the Free World, and is enjoying every moment of it.

More, racist new laws are either passing or are scheduled for vote at the Israeli Knesset. One of these demands allegiance to Israel as "a Jewish and democratic state." Many will have to take that oath or lose their citizenry rights in the country. It is an undemocratic law by every account, and is aimed largely at the Palestinian Christian and Muslim population, the natives of that land. The timings of these legislations are also meant to underscore Israel's determination to do whatever it deems necessary. This will serve the rightwing parties in Israel very well in future elections.

As for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, there is little to be said. He has no political power, leverage or influence. He can only do as he is told. He might send out the occasional threat of quitting political life, but frankly few are paying attention or worried about that possibility.

However, Abbas has, perhaps inadvertently, helped Netanyahu by providing him with a political platform whereby the Israeli leader can claim to be engaged in a legitimate peace process with a Palestinian partner. This alone was enough to bring Netanyahu and his country from back political oblivion into the center stage of international diplomacy. The bloodbath that Israel unleashed on Gaza from 2008 to 2009, the ongoing siege, the killing of activists abroad the Freedom Flotilla have all been cast aside for now. Instead we listen to Netanyahu speak of peace, prosperity and security for all, amid hearty clapping and standing ovations.

Hundreds of Israeli speakers, politicians, diplomats and scholars have been circling the globe in recent months, talking about Israel's undying commitment to peace. While this goes on, Israeli bulldozers are back in full gear, tearing down homes, businesses and olive groves. Israel continues to expand settlements and build what is rightly termed the Apartheid Wall, all with little, if any criticism from the US, the self-declared honest peace broker. Worse, as much as the political theater is organized and financed by US dollars, the full-scale destruction taking place in the West Bank and East Jerusalem is also courtesy of

US coffers. Such is the self-defeating policy of the United States. Such is the peace process.

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