

Obama's Cave-In To Israel

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Nazareth — The disclosure of the details of a letter reportedly sent by President Barack Obama last week to Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, will cause Palestinians to be even more sceptical about US and Israeli roles in the current peace talks.

According to the leak, Obama made a series of extraordinarily generous offers to Israel, many of them at the expense of the Palestinians, in return for a single minor concession from Netanyahu: a two-month extension of the partial freeze on settlement growth.

A previous 10-month freeze, which ended a week ago, has not so far been renewed by Netanyahu, threatening to bring the negotiations to an abrupt halt. The Palestinians are expected to decide whether to quit the talks over the coming days.

Netanyahu was reported last week to have declined the US offer.

The White House has denied that a letter was sent, but, according to the Israeli media, officials in Washington are privately incensed by Netanyahu's rejection.

The disclosures were made by an informed source: David Makovsky, of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a close associate of Dennis Ross, Obama's chief adviser on the Middle East, who is said to have initiated the offer.

The letter's contents have also been partly confirmed by Jewish US senators who attended a briefing last week from Ross.

According to Makovsky, in return for the 60-day settlement moratorium, the US promised to veto any UN Security Council proposal on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the next year, and committed to not seek any further extensions of the freeze. The future of the settlements would be addressed only in a final agreement.

The White House would also allow Israel to keep a military presence in the West Bank's Jordan Valley, even after the creation of a Palestinian state; continue controlling the borders of the Palestinian territories to prevent smuggling; provide Israel with enhanced weapons systems, security guarantees and increase its million of dollars in annual aid; and create a regional security pact against Iran.

There are several conclusions the Palestinian leadership is certain to draw from this attempt at deal-making over its head.

The first is that the US president, much like his predecessors, is in no position to act as an honest broker. His interests in the negotiations largely coincide with Israel's.

Obama needs a short renewal of the freeze, and the semblance of continuing Israeli and Palestinian participation in the “peace process”, until the US Congressional elections in November.

Criticism by the powerful pro-Israel lobby in Washington may damage Obama’s Democratic party unless he treads a very thin line. He needs to create the impression of progress in the Middle East talks but not upset Israel’s supporters by making too many demands of Netanyahu.

The second conclusion — already strongly suspected by Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, and his advisers — is that Netanyahu, despite his professed desire to establish a Palestinian state, is being insincere.

The White House’s private offer meets most of Netanyahu’s demands for US security and diplomatic assistance even before the negotiations have produced tangible results. For Netanyahu to reject the offer so lightly, even though the US was expecting relatively little in return, suggests he is either in no mood or in no position to make real concessions to the Palestinians on statehood.

The Israeli newspaper Haaretz reported last Friday that senior White House officials were no longer “buying the excuse of political difficulties” for Netanyahu in holding his rightwing governing coalition together. If he cannot keep his partners on board over a short freeze on illegal settlement building, what meaningful permanent concessions can he make in the talks?

The third conclusion for the Palestinians is that no possible combination of governing parties in Israel is capable of signing an agreement with Abbas that will not entail significant compromises on the territorial integrity of a Palestinian state.

One US concession — allowing Israel to maintain its hold on the Jordan Valley, nearly a fifth of the West Bank, for the foreseeable future — reflects a demand common to all Israeli politicians, not just Netanyahu.

In fact, the terms of Obama’s letter were drafted in cooperation with Ehud Barak, Israel’s defence minister and leader of the supposedly leftwing Labor party. When he was prime minister a decade ago, he insisted on a similar military presence in the Valley during the failed Camp David talks.

Ariel Sharon, his successor and founder of the centrist Kadima party, planned a new section of the separation wall to divide the Jordan Valley from the rest of the West Bank, though the scheme was put on hold after American objections.

Today, most Palestinians cannot enter the Jordan Valley without a special permit that is rarely issued, and the area’s tens of thousands of Palestinian inhabitants are subjected to constant military harassment. B’Tselem, an Israeli human rights group, has accused Israel of a “de facto annexation” of the area.

But without the Jordan Valley, the creation of a viable Palestinian state – even one limited to the West Bank, without Gaza — would be inconceivable. Statehood would instead resemble the Swiss-cheese model the Palestinians have long feared is all Israel is proposing.

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