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THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONUNDRUM

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(Excerpt)

THE FIRST urgent challenge is, of course, the Middle East peace process. Obama stated early on that he would take the initiative on this issue and aim for a settlement in the relative near term. That position is justified historically and is in keeping with the United States' national interest. Paralysis over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has lasted far too long, and leaving it unresolved has pernicious consequences for the Palestinians, for the region, and for the United States, and it will eventually harm Israel. It is not fashionable to say this, but it is demonstrably true that – deservedly or not – much of the current hostility toward the United States in the Middle East and the Islamic world as a whole has been generated by the bloodshed and suffering produced by this prolonged conflict. Osama bin Laden's self-serving justifications for 9/11 are a reminder that the United States itself is also a victim of the Israeli-Palestinian conundrum.

By now, after more than 40 years of Israeli occupation of the West Bank and 30 years of peace negotiations, it is quite evident that left to themselves, neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians will resolve the conflict on their own. There are many reasons for this, but the bottom line is that the Palestinians are too divided and too weak to make the critical decisions necessary to push the peace process forward, and the Israelis are too divided and too strong to do the same. As a result, a firm external initiative defining the basic parameters of a final settlement is needed to jump-start serious negotiations between the two parties. And that can only come from the United States.

But the necessary outside stimulus has not yet been forthcoming in a fashion consistent with U.S. interests and potential. In raising the issue of the settlements in the spring of 2009 but then later backing off when rebuffed by the Israeli government, the administration strengthened the hard-line elements in Israel and undercut the more moderate elements on the Palestinian side. Then, an opportunity provided by the annual UN General Assembly meeting in September to identify the United States with the overwhelming global consensus about the basic parameters of a peace settlement was squandered. Instead of seizing it, Obama merely urged the Israelis and the Palestinians to negotiate in good faith.

Yet the existing global consensus could serve as a launching pad for serious negotiations on four basic points. First, Palestinian refugees should not be granted the right of return to what is now Israel, because Israel cannot be expected to commit suicide for the sake of peace. The refugees will have to be resettled within the Palestinian state, with compensation and maybe some expression of regret for their suffering. This will be very difficult for the Palestinian national movement to swallow, but there is no alternative.

Second, Jerusalem has to be shared, and shared genuinely. The Israeli capital, of course, would be in West Jerusalem, but East Jerusalem should be the capital of a

Palestinian state, with the Old City shared under some international arrangement. If a genuine compromise on Jerusalem is not part of a settlement, resentment will persist throughout the West Bank and the Palestinians will reject the peace process. Although such a compromise will understandably be difficult for the Israelis to accept, without it there cannot be a peace of reconciliation.

Third, a settlement must be based on the 1967 lines, but with territorial swaps that would allow the large settlements to be incorporated into Israel without any further reduction of the territory of the Palestinian state. That means some territorial compensation for Palestine from parts of northern and southern Israel that border the West Bank. It is important to remember that although the Israeli and Palestinian populations are almost equal in number, under the 1967 lines the Palestinian territories account for only 22 percent of the old British mandate, whereas the Israeli territories account for 78 percent.

Fourth, the United States or NATO must make a commitment to station troops along the Jordan River. Such a move would reinforce Israel's security with strategic depth. It would reduce Israel's fears that an independent Palestine could some day serve as a springboard for a major Arab attack on Israel.

Had Obama embraced this internationally favored blueprint for peace when he addressed the UN in September, he would have exerted enormous influence on both the Israelis and the Palestinians and instantaneously gained global support. Failing to endorse this plan was a missed opportunity, especially since the two-state solution is beginning to lose some of its credibility as a viable formula for reconciliation between the Israelis and the Palestinians and within the region. Moreover, there are indications that the United States is already losing the goodwill and renewed confidence of the Arab world that Obama won with his speech in Cairo in June.

The next few months will be critical, and the time for decisive action is running out. Perhaps as a consolation to the Palestinians (and in spite of some opposition within the White House) or perhaps as a reaffirmation of his determination to continue pressing the parties to focus on the key issues, in his UN speech Obama called for final-status negotiations to begin soon and included on the agenda four items similar to these. He also made it explicitly clear that the talks' ultimate goal ought to be "a viable, independent Palestinian state with contiguous territory that ends the occupation that began in 1967." It can be hoped that the president seized the moment offered by the Oslo ceremony at which the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded (which at the time of this writing had not yet occurred) to give more substance to his Middle East peace initiative. But so far, the Obama team has shown neither the tactical skill nor the strategic firmness needed to move the peace process forward.