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## **RESUMING TALKS WHERE THEY LEFT OFF**

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Notwithstanding President Barak Obama's conciliatory speech in Cairo, Egypt the likelihood of solving the Middle East's many interrelated problems appear as unlikely as ever. In fact, the chances of bringing into existence a Palestinian state seems further away. From all indications the current policy of the United States government is to publicly pressure what is arguably Israel's most intransigent prime minister to make "settlement concessions" to a reluctant and discordant group that claim to represent the Palestinian people.

Indeed, the Obama administration has been acting as if it suddenly discovered that "settlement activity" is the decisive impediment to an Israeli-Arab peace accord and if a stoppage occurred, it would cause all the other regional dominoes to fall into place.

In reality, however, the President is expressing policies that every American administration since 1967 has articulated. Even Ronald Reagan, a staunch Zionist, stated that, "settlements were an obstacle to peace".

Put simply, this issue has never had anything to do with facilitating, or impeding peace. Because even before a single settlement was built after the 1967 Six Day War the Arabs were just as close-minded as they are today about accepting a Jewish state in their midst. And they became no more placated when Israel dismantled all settlements in Gaza and then offered to evacuate most of those on the West Bank.

Thus all this discussion about "freezing settlements" is not only redundant but a distraction that delays both sides from getting together to bargain away their differences and bring about two secure states for two people.

Previously this was attempted from July 2000 to January 2001 when "lame duck" President Bill Clinton summoned Ehud Barak of Israel and Yasser Arafat of the Palestine Authority to Camp David and then to Taba, Egypt. Having survived the ordeal of impeachment, the President wanted to leave office on a high note by solving this long running conflict.

What Mr. Clinton brought to this negotiation endeavor was his persistence and considerable persuasive skills. He is one of the rare people who can communicate concern and compassion in the space of a handshake.

Casting himself as an honest broker, the President and his Secretary of State Madeline Albright, believed they had a special relationship with the P.A. chairman. After all, he had visited the White House more than any other “head of state”. As for Mr. Barak, a military hero who had known the horrors of war, his prior return of the territory in Southern Lebanon, occupied for decades by the IDF, indicated his strong desire to deal for a final peace.

After months of tough bargaining and haggling over details, resolution was achieved on many contentious matters. One of the areas that was finally agreed upon was that Israel would return to the Palestinians approximately 95% of their pre-1967 land. The remaining 5% making Palestine whole, would come from Israel proper.

Eventually two major controversial subjects could not be settled: the plight of the Palestinian refugees who had fled Israel and the status of Jerusalem. While some progress was made on the first issue, Jerusalem stayed as a stumbling block. Actually, it was the emotionally charged matter of sovereignty and control of the Muslim holy sites (Haram ash-es-Sharif) which touched upon Pan-Arab religious sensitivities that most concerned Mr. Arafat.

Once this became apparent, Arafat broke-off negotiations (without offering a counterproposal) in order to seek cover and obtain support from Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately no help was forthcoming from Hosni Mubarak or the Saudi Royal family. At that time they needed Israel as a scapegoat to blame for their people’s frustrations and disappointments.

Meanwhile, the intervening years has seen the end of Sunni-run Iraq and the emergence of Shia Iran. Obviously both Egypt and Saudi Arabia are threatened by Iran’s revolutionary Ayatollah regime which clearly is in pursuit of nuclear weapons. More troubling, it is allied with Syria and controls both Hezbollah and Hamas. Therefore, in the strange geopolitical world of Cairo and Riyadh, Israel may be moving from despicable enemy to tacit ally of convenience.

Consequently, the Obama administration has a propitious opportunity to focus not upon settlements but on encouraging Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Abbas to resume face to face negotiations. Recently the Israeli Prime Minister said for the first time that he would support a Palestinian state, albeit one that would be demilitarized and recognize Israel as a “Jewish State”.

It is significant that for the first time Netanyahu admitted that the Palestinians deserve their own state. Although Palestinian leaders dismissed this major concession, saying it contained so many caveats as to render it useless, it nevertheless is the basis to re-start serious negotiations.

So this is the time for President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton to put pressure on both sides to return to the bargaining table. Let’s not forget that negotiation is a process where both parties attempt to reach a joint decision on matters of common concerns in situations in which there is initial disagreement. Certainly in the absence of discord there’d be nothing to negotiate about. The current situation meets these criteria.