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Article 1.

The Washington Post

White House’s Mideast policy must be clear and resolute

Editorial

September 17 - How will Iran respond to the U.S.-Russian initiative to control and destroy Syria’s chemical weapons? President Obama took a rosy view in an interview broadcast Sunday, telling ABC News that “the Iranians recognize they shouldn’t draw a lesson that . . . we won’t strike Iran” to stop its nuclear program from the fact that force was not used against Syria. On the contrary, the president asserted, Tehran “should draw from this . . . that there is the potential of resolving these issues diplomatically.”

Set aside for the moment Mr. Obama's clumsy claim that "the Iranians understand that the nuclear issue is a far larger issue for us than the chemical weapons issue," made just a few days after he said in a televised address that Syria's chemical weapons use was "a crime against humanity" that puts at stake "our ideals and principles, as well as our national security." Is he right to think that his head-snapping shift from proposing military strikes against Syria to embracing diplomacy will make Iran more, rather than less, inclined to bargain seriously over its enrichment of uranium? In fact, the signals are mixed. Some Iran-watchers believe that recently elected President Hassan Rouhani is exploring the possibility of rapprochement with the United States. He and Mr. Obama have exchanged letters, and U.S. and Iranian officials are reported to be exploring the possibility of direct talks between the two governments for the first time since 1979. Mr. Obama and Secretary of State John F. Kerry have hinted at possible Iranian participation in a peace settlement in Syria — something the Obama administration previously ruled out. There are reports that Mr. Rouhani is preparing to unveil a proposal to limit its uranium enrichment in exchange for the lifting of sanctions. If so, Mr. Obama's acceptance of a diplomatic path in Syria could encourage that initiative.

At the same time, the president's ad hoc maneuvering could offer encouragement to Iranian hard-liners. His sudden decision to postpone an attack in favor of consultations with Congress — and the stiff resistance he then encountered — raised questions throughout the Mideast about U.S. resolve. Mr. Obama's repeated declarations that he has no intention of intervening in Syria's civil war could be taken by Tehran as meaning that it can continue bolstering the regime of Bashar al-Assad with

impunity. Why participate in a negotiated settlement if there is no chance that the United States will tip the military balance against Iran's client?

In the end, Iran's response to the emerging Syria deal — like that of its adversaries Saudi Arabia and Israel — will depend on whether and how it is implemented. If the Assad regime seeks to conceal part of its arsenal, impede inspections or drag out the agreed timetable for action, a failure by the Obama administration to respond forcefully would send a fateful message of weakness to Tehran. It would also probably convince Israel that it can no longer be constrained by the United States from taking its own military action against Iranian nuclear facilities. It is consequentially crucial that Mr. Obama make clear that he is prepared to carry out the military strike he had planned against the Syrian regime if Damascus does not comply — beginning with this week's required declaration of its chemical weapons and facilities.

[Article 2.](#)

The National Interest

Russia's Syria Deal Is Not Real

[Ashley Frohwein](#)

September 17, 2013 -- It's time for a reality check. Russia's proposed deal for Syria to abandon its chemical weapons arsenal

is hardly, in President Obama's words, a "significant breakthrough." The president said last week that the initiative could avert American strikes on Syria "if it's real." But it isn't. Rather, the Russian plan will not work—and Obama knows it. Yet he and his administration have welcomed this initiative. Why?

A senior State Department official recently said that any proposed deal must be "swift", "real", and "verifiable." The administration has also declared that it must be "comprehensive" and "enforceable ." For many reasons, it can be none of these things.

The deal won't be swift. As Dina Esfandiari has pointed out, even if Assad were to fully declare all of his chemical weapons stockpiles—a big if—it is unlikely that this could be done in the seven-day timeframe proposed by Secretary of State John Kerry, who rejected Assad's argument that Syria should have 30 days to do so. Destroying a chemical arsenal as large as Assad's, estimated by some to be the world's largest, "doesn't happen overnight. In fact, it is more realistic to talk in years than in months."

The plan won't be enforceable, because Russia has refused to agree to any deal that is. Although the U.S., Britain, and France concur that any chemical inspection regime for Syria must be legally binding and backed by the authorization to use force under Chapter VII of the UN Charter in response to Syrian noncompliance, Russia has already objected to a draft Security Council resolution to this effect. So administration officials changed their tune on Friday, saying that Obama would accept a UN Security Council resolution (UNSCR) not backed by the

threat of force.

Although Russia and the U.S. have since agreed to file a UNSCR under Chapter VII, any violations warranting punishment would be referred back to the Security Council, where Russia could block the use of force. As Secretary Kerry noted, “Use of force is clearly one of the options that may or may not be available to the Security Council” (italics mine). But even with Chapter VII authority, the middling American and international reactions to the regime’s previous alleged instances of chemical weapons use—to the extent that there has been any reaction—would hardly convince Assad that violation of the deal would be inescapably met with force.

No wonder Assad immediately embraced the plan. What’s more, he is attempting to milk it for all it’s worth. Russian President Vladimir Putin said a deal could work only if the U.S. and its relevant allies “tell us they’re giving up their plan to use force against Syria.” Apparently this is insufficient for Assad, who said in an interview on Thursday that Syria won’t relinquish its chemical weapons unless the U.S. stops arming the rebels, which the CIA began doing in recent weeks, according to Syrian figures and American officials.

A deal along the lines of the Russian proposal will also not be comprehensive, verifiable, or real, owing to the fact that the Assad regime and opposition forces each control territory in Syria, and many areas are hotly contested. Although a CRS report released on Thursday states that “U.S. officials have expressed confidence that chemical weapons stocks in Syria are secured by the Asad regime”, on-the-ground inspection will be necessary to verify this; that is, they are needed if the goal of the

plan is to verifiably rid Syria of chemical weapons—as opposed to merely depriving the Syrian government of them.

That some element(s) of the opposition might possess chemical weapons is not beyond the realm of possibility. In May, Carla Del Ponte, a member of the UN Independent Commission of Enquiry on Syria, suggested in an interview that the rebels had used sarin gas, a claim quickly rejected by the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Gwyn Winfield, the editorial director of CBRNe World, argues that the rebels possess the experience and perhaps also the delivery capability to launch a chemical attack, and that it is possible that the rebels may "have overrun an arms dump which had some of the [chemical] agent" or that a government "defector brought a limited amount with him." On Friday, Turkish prosecutors alleged that Syrian rebel groups were seeking materials to produce sarin gas for the Al Nusra Front and the Ahrar al-Sham Brigade (both groups are unaffiliated with the FSA). From the first instance of alleged chemical weapons use, in Aleppo this March, to the most recent, in Ghoutta on August 21, the Syrian government has accused the rebels of using chemical weapons, as has Russia. Secretary Kerry did not contest Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's contention that there may be one or two chemical weapons sites in rebel-held locations.

Will inspectors even attempt to enter rebel-held territory? If chemical disarmament in Syria is to be truly comprehensive, then they must. (After all, Russia and Syria have charged that there are chemical weapons in these areas.) The plan envisions that both government and opposition forces will facilitate the inspectors' work.

This puts the anti-Assad opposition in a serious bind. If a deal is reached and weapons inspectors from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) are sent to Syria, will they be granted access to rebel-held areas, which comprise a majority of the country? What incentive will the rebels have to facilitate a verification effort that, if successful, would significantly reduce the likelihood of international armed intervention in their favor? None. But they also would not want to be seen as obstructing the inspectors' efforts and, by extension, sabotaging diplomatic attempts to resolve the conflict. Whether or not the opposition concocts some reason to deny the inspectors access or obstruct their movement, they would have an incentive to do so. Unsurprisingly, the opposition slammed the deal. The leader of the FSA, General Salim Idriss, already categorically rejected the plan. He insisted that there are “no chemical weapons on territory controlled by the Free Syrian Army,” but declared that his forces would “not hinder the work of UN monitors” if they sought to enter rebel-controlled territory. The Syrian National Coalition has also opposed it, saying in a statement that “Crimes against humanity cannot be absolved through political concessions, or surrendering the weapons used to commit them.”

Nonetheless, even if the rebels do not currently control chemical weapons, government-held territory where chemical weapons are based could fall into their hands before the weapons are removed or destroyed. As the recent CRS report notes, “The nature and recent course of the conflict in Syria suggests that rapid changes in control over critical military facilities may occur.” And if rebels do possess chemical weapons—now or prospectively—these weapons could subsequently fall into

government hands if the regime makes territorial gains. There are also many other reasons why a deal can't work on an operational level, particularly because it would have to be implemented in an active warzone, but you get the point. So what could explain the administration's embrace of it?

One potential explanation is that Obama really does want to strike Syria, and is attempting to build political support for doing so. By pursuing this diplomatic path—which he knows is likely to fail—the president can make the case that all peaceful options have been exhausted and that he is resorting to force as a last resort. This could help shift opinion at home, both in Congress and amongst the American people, as well as internationally, particularly among U.S. allies. It provides time to whip together much-needed votes on the Hill for authorizing force—if there ever is a vote. Another possible explanation is that the administration doesn't know what it will do next, and sees Russia's proposal as a way to just buy time and determine its next move. It can be tempting to try to make sense of individual actions by situating them within the context of some larger, preconceived strategy. But we should keep in mind that there might be no overarching game plan here. Many aspects of how the administration has responded to the Syrian crisis so far are certainly consistent with this. Or maybe Obama just wants a break. By pursuing Russia's proposal, the administration has embarked down a road to nowhere. Yet it is difficult to know how long of a road it will be, or what might transpire along the way. It seems plausible that Obama hopes it will be quite long—prolonging the time during which the ball is not in his court—or that it will hit a dead-end upon reaching nowhere. Perhaps he wants both.

The president seems to want to wipe his hands of this whole mess. This was clearly illustrated when he told reporters on Thursday that he is shifting his focus to domestic priorities and leaving Secretary Kerry to handle Syria talks. "Even as we have been spending a lot of time on the Syria issue [...] it is still important to recognize that we've got a lot more stuff to do here," he said. Instead of Syria, the president will now focus on immigration, budget, and healthcare issues. Unlike with regards to Syria, he might make meaningful progress in these areas.

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Article 3.

The National Interest

Russia Is Back

Ariel Cohen

September 17, 2013 -- President Obama has accepted an exit strategy from the Syria crisis proposed by Vladimir Putin. Obama surmised that if the plan works, it might lead to a breakthrough. In his Tuesday speech to the nation last week, Obama indefinitely postponed a crucial Congressional vote on whether to strike the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. No wonder: Obama most probably would have lost that vote. By

Saturday, he agreed to a deal negotiated by John Kerry and Sergey Lavrov in Geneva.

This was hardly a glorious case of presidential crisis management. Many influential Senators—including Democrats—would have opposed authorizing force. The House was clearly against the President. A majority of American voters, exhausted by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, did not support the strike, and Congressional elections are only a year away.

Obama seemed to have climbed up the proverbial tree, and it was Russian President Vladimir Putin who played a crucial role in providing him a ladder to climb down—at a price. Thus, Putin, in a typical geopolitical “judo” move, stepped closer to Obama—in order to neutralize him politically. By providing a way out for the American president from a perceived tight corner, Putin made himself appear more powerful. And the optics matter as much as substance.

In a tactically impressive move, Putin, ever eager to assert Moscow’s role in the Middle East and oppose the U.S. and her Sunni allies, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, offered to put Syria’s chemical arsenal under UN control and then destroy it under international supervision. Damascus has joined the Chemical Weapons Convention and signaled consent to the Putin plan.

In what appears as yet another strategic blunder, Obama even elected to forego a binding UN Security Council resolution on Syrian disarmament under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which allows for enforcement, while Putin may hit the geopolitical jackpot.

If the disarmament initiative succeeds, Obama will “owe” Putin. America will be enticed to forget quickly the damage caused by the NSA and CIA defector Edward Snowden, who received asylum in Russia. America will remain mum as a Russian court has sentenced anticorruption crusader and whistleblower Alexei Navalny. Moscow is rife with rumors about preparations for the third trial of jailed oil tycoon and political opponent Mikhail Khodorkovsky. It is equally unlikely that Russia’s ambitious plans to expand the Eurasian Union to include Armenia and Ukraine into the Customs Union will meet a vigorous U.S. response.

Obama may not realize that Putin, a former KGB recruiting officer, seems to have played him like a violin. Putin has demonstrated that he is capable of stopping the world’s only superpower from using force—making him “the go to” man, to whom many on the U.S. blacklist will run to seek protection.

Putin will also have demonstrated that Russia, despite being seven times smaller than the U.S. economically, and weaker militarily, is capable of gaining impressive geopolitical results even when dealt a poor hand. As the military operation against Assad is postponed, Putin has increased the chances of the pro-Iranian regime’s survival, and possibly ensured the continued presence of a modest Russian naval facility in Tartus.

Moscow also has a growing interest in a Shia strategic belt extending from Lebanon via Syria and Iraq to Iran, as it prevents Sunni radicals from flooding into the North Caucasus and Central Asia—Russia’s soft underbelly.

Moscow also sent a signal that a U.S. military operation against

the Iranian nuclear program may not happen—without the UN Security Council—i.e., the Kremlin’s—sanction. And that sanction will not be forthcoming.

Not bad for a week’s work.

It appears that at least for now, Russia is winning a zero-sum game—the Kremlin’s favorite geopolitical sport.

The Kremlin is boosting its status as the great balancer of America. This benefits Moscow—and further encourages it to stand up to America.

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[Article 4.](#)

The Wall Street Journal

A Very Productive Chemical-Weapons Attack

Douglas J. Feith

September 16, 2013 -- Bashar Assad may have pulled off the most successful use of chemical weapons in history. For the two

years leading up to the Aug. 21 Damascus sarin gas attack, President Obama was saying that the Syrian dictator "must go." No longer. In one month, Assad has risen from outlaw butcher to partner in disarmament.

America's Syria policy today focuses not on mass murder, or on the metastasizing humanitarian and refugee crisis, or on combating the interests of Iran and its Hezbollah proxies in keeping Assad in power. Rather, with Russian President Vladimir Putin's help, U.S. policy under President Obama is concentrating on chemical-weapons disarmament.

Secretary of State John Kerry labors to enlist Assad in an arms-control project even while alleging that the dictator has used nerve gas in violation of Syria's obligations under the 1925 Geneva Protocol. U.S. policy is not to oust the Assad regime or even to encourage the Syrian people to do so. President Obama has now created a U.S. interest in preserving Assad in power.

This means Assad must stay, not go, for he is needed to negotiate and implement an arrangement to destroy Syria's chemical weapons. The arrangement, if successfully negotiated, will take years to implement. Arms control evidently means never having to say you're sorry.

Meanwhile, the Syrian rebels are exasperated and mistrustful, having seen Washington dangle the prospect of U.S. military strikes, only to back away. The Iranians are drawing comforting lessons about the lengths that the Obama administration will go to avoid military action in the Middle East. The Russians have been promoted from reprehensible accomplices in Assad's evil to indispensable peace negotiators—while they remain accomplices to that evil.

What lesson will dictators around the world derive from all this? They will see that there is enormous utility in creating a chemical-weapons arsenal, and even in using such weapons. Sarin gas, VX, anthrax and the like can be valuable for intimidating one's enemies, foreign and domestic, and for killing them. They can then be traded away at a very high price under the right circumstances. They can serve as a lifesaver for a dictator on the skids.

Clever dictators will realize that they can barter their chemical-weapons arsenals to buy time to crush an insurrection and then rebuild the arsenal after the population has been pacified.

This is what comes of focusing on what Mr. Obama legalistically calls the "international norms" barring chemical weapons use. By choosing not to tackle the difficult strategic and humanitarian challenges posed by the Syrian civil war, the president is now rewarding the very offenses that he said he wanted to punish. In the name of arms control, he is incentivizing the proliferation of chemical weapons. In the name of international law, he is undermining respect for treaties. In the name of U.S. interests, he is emboldening America's enemies.

Bashar Assad must be blessing the sarin gas that killed all those men, women and children on Aug. 21. If he did order that attack, it was a master stroke. The victims of chemical weapons shake in agony. Assad, Vladimir Putin and Iran's Ali Khamanei shake with laughter.

Mr. Feith, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, served 2001-

05 as U.S. undersecretary of defense for policy.

Article 5.

The Wall Street Journal

The Price of Ignoring Mideast Reality

Bret Stephens

September 16, 2013 -- Forty years ago Israel blundered disastrously on the eve of the Yom Kippur War because its military leaders had a concept about the circumstances in which it might be attacked, and the concept was wrong. Twenty years ago, Israel blundered disastrously by signing the Oslo Accord, because its political leaders had a concept about what it would take to get peace, and the concept was wrong.

Beware of policy makers bearing concepts.

That's worth pondering as the Obama administration peddles another concept—that a deal with Russia will lead to disarmament by Syria—as a reason to call off military strikes. But agreements are not achievements, wishes are not facts, and theory is not reality.

In 1973, what Israeli military planners called Ha'Conceptzia—the Concept—was that Egypt would not attack without Syria, Syria would not attack without Egypt, and Egypt lacked the long-range bombers and ballistic missiles it would

need to retake the Sinai Peninsula. It was a comforting syllogism that allowed Israel to dismiss accumulating evidence of an impending attack, including a personal warning from Jordan's King Hussein, as nothing more than psychological warfare.

The flaw with the Concept was the Concept: Theory provides vision at the expense of clarity. It also obstructs thought. Had the Egyptian goal been to retake the entirety of the Sinai, Anwar Sadat would never have ordered an attack.

But Israel's planners broadly failed to foresee that the Egyptians might be prepared to forego the hopeless military objective of retaking all of Sinai for the feasible one of retaking some of it; that Sadat could use limited military means to land a decisive psychological and political blow. The Israelis also neglected to take account of the possibility that the Egyptians could turn the Concept to their own advantage. The Concept made no allowance for the reality that humans are intelligent and nature is adaptive.

In that sense, the Concept was like every grand theory that ignores its own role in reshuffling assumptions and reshaping incentives. It was the same story with next grand Concept, when an Israeli government determined that peace was in its hands to give, and that what it chose to give was what the other side would be willing to accept.

The signing of Oslo, under Bill Clinton's big shadow on the White House lawn, is widely remembered as a moment of hope. In fact it was an act of hubris.

Yitzhak Rabin (who would pay for Oslo with his life) thought he could deputize Yasser Arafat as his sheriff, so that Israeli

soldiers would no longer have to go door-to-door in Gaza and the West Bank. Shimon Peres imagined a new Middle East in which Arab states would be falling over themselves to strike trade deals with Israel. Some architects of the Accord thought the Palestinians could be bought off on the cheap, with autonomy instead of statehood, with Ramallah as the capital instead of Jerusalem, with Hamas permanently suppressed, with the refugee issue taken off the table. Others believed the Israeli public could gradually be brought around to concede things they never would have agreed to at the start.

Dissimulation was thus the essence of what came to be known as the peace process. But the Concept behind Oslo was that Israelis and Palestinians would accept their assigned roles—that they could be acted upon without reacting in turn.

Arafat's assigned role was to become governor of an inoffensive Arab statelet. He, however, thought of himself as the second coming of Saladin, the Muslim hero who captured Jerusalem from the Crusaders. The Israeli public was assigned the role of providing democratic assent to territorial concessions that previous Israeli governments had said for 25 years would be suicidal. But the purpose of democracy is to give people a chance to contest their leaders. And Palestinians were given the role of being Arafat's sheep, with no interests, opinions or prejudices of their own. But Palestinians know otherwise.

Oslo failed for the same reason Israel's military assumptions 20 years earlier had failed: It assumed a world in which people had no agency, enemies had no cunning and circumstances remained static. The world's not like that. And while John Kerry was attempting to reanimate the spirit of Oslo before he got

distracted by Syria, the Accord must rank as the greatest diplomatic debacle in modern Mideast history.

Until now, that is. The Obama administration has given up on exacting some tangible price on Bashar Assad for using chemical weapons, in exchange for a promise by Russia that it will intervene to remove those weapons.

And so it begins again. We substitute the Concept for reality. We imagine that those to whom the Concept applies will behave as we expect, or demand, or wish. We neglect how the existence of the Concept changes incentives. We lull ourselves into thinking that the logic of the Concept is the way of the world.

And then the Concept blows up in our face. Don't expect Barack Obama to pay a political price for the latest installment of peace in our time.

[Article 6.](#)

Financial Times

Cruise missiles alone cannot secure credibility

Gideon Rachman

September 16 - Viewed from Washington, the Syrian crisis has been only partly about chemical weapons. The other crucial

commodity at stake was American “credibility” – that mystical quality on which US and global security is often deemed to depend.

A Russian diplomatic initiative has saved Barack Obama from the prospect of a humiliating defeat in Congress over Syria. Yet the entire episode has left the impression that America’s president, politicians and public are increasingly reluctant to deploy military force – even when a US “red line” has been crossed. That has raised worries that America’s rivals, from Iran to China, will soon be tempted to test US resolve. This possibility is certainly there. Yet those who worry that US power rests on the nation’s willingness always to enforce its red lines are taking too narrow a view of what “credibility” means for a great power. The willingness to honour security commitments is just one element. Not making terrible mistakes in foreign policy is another crucial part of credibility – as is the preservation of a strong economy and an attractive society. The biggest blows to US global power and prestige in the past decade were inflicted by the Iraq war and by the financial crisis of 2008. Neither had anything to do with an unwillingness to defend a red line or a reluctance to fire off cruise missiles.

Indeed, one lesson of Iraq was that ill-conceived military intervention can be far more damaging to US power than any hesitancy about the use of force. In fact, arguably the two biggest blows to American global standing in half a century both flowed from mistaken military interventions, with Iraq repeating some of the damage done by Vietnam. By contrast, the biggest triumph for US foreign policy – the collapse of the Soviet empire – was achieved without a shot being fired.

For conservatives, Ronald Reagan is the epitome of a strong president – just as Jimmy Carter, and now Mr Obama, epitomise weakness. Yet, while Reagan certainly increased defence spending, he was very wary of actually deploying troops. The boldest mission for the military under Reagan was the invasion of Grenada – population 90,000. When 241 US servicemen were killed by a bombing in Lebanon in 1983, Reagan pulled American troops out. The aerial bombardment of Libya during the Reagan years was a short punitive strike, with no thought of regime change – rather similar to what Mr Obama was planning for Syria. In the end, the strength that mattered in the Reagan years was a domestic economic revival, which helped to restore US confidence and prestige at a time when the Soviet economy was falling apart.

Mr Obama has certainly grasped the point that US global strength ultimately rests on the strength of its economy – witness his oft-repeated insistence that America needs to concentrate on “nation-building at home”. The rise and fall of other global hegemony in the past century reinforces the point. The decline of Britain, France and the Soviet Union was caused by the fact that their economies were too weak to sustain their international commitments. In all three cases, the cost of fighting wars had sapped the nation. The USSR’s intervention in Afghanistan was one of the final nails in its coffin. Britain’s ability to sustain an empire was in effect ended by the costs of the second world war. And the strength of postwar France was undermined by ill-fated wars in Algeria and Indochina. With China soon to surpass the US as the largest economy, America cannot assume that it is able to afford to make costly military mistakes long into the future.

But Mr Obama's determination to avoid new foreign conflicts was shaken by Syria's use of chemical weapons. The president and his team were genuinely horrified by the use of poison gas – and also wanted to demonstrate America's red line meant something. Mr Obama attempted to reconcile his call for a military response with his own anti-interventionist instincts by repeatedly emphasising how limited his plans were – “unbelievably small” in the words of John Kerry, secretary of state. But sceptics raised the obvious questions about what such a limited strike would achieve; and whether one intervention would lead to another.

The Syrian crisis is a classic hard case – with strong arguments on both sides of the debate. And although Mr Obama steered a wobbly course, his threat to use military power was nonetheless made – and did force a shift in the positions of both Russia and Syria. For while it is possible that President Vladimir Putin of Russia was prompted to make his diplomatic initiative because of a hitherto unnoticed generosity of spirit towards Mr Obama, it seems more likely Moscow moved fast because it was genuinely alarmed by the prospect of US military action in the Middle East. In that sense, for all his fumbling, Mr Obama's threat of military action was effective.

It would certainly be a foolish nation that concludes Washington's failure immediately to fire missiles at Syria means that US military power is now permanently off the table in international affairs. America remains the pre-eminent military power in the world – with a long history of armed interventions. The fact that Mr Obama is determined to use greater caution and deliberation before taking military action need not detract from American credibility. It may help to preserve it.

The Washington Institute

Oslo Still Relevant At Twenty

David Makovsky

September 16, 2013 -- Capped by a White House handshake twenty years ago this past Friday, the Oslo Accords marked a historic breakthrough: mutual recognition by two national movements that had fought each other intensely for decades, and mutual agreement to pursue a transitional approach that would lead to a peaceful outcome. Given past expectations that the process would spur Israelis and Palestinians to quickly shift from enemies to peace partners, there is ample reason today for each side to focus on the agreement's shortcomings. Yet its actual legacy is more varied.

BENEFITS FOR BOTH SIDES

Among Oslo's landmark accomplishments was that it clarified who the negotiators were. Until 1993, the conflict was marked by decades of failure to define a Palestinian interlocutor. Many people forget that Oslo never mandated two states -- an outcome on which there is wide agreement today among Israelis, Palestinians, and the international community. One of Oslo's best legacies is that the majority of each population now favors a two-state solution, though each is convinced that the other does not share its convictions.

Moreover, the Palestinians now have a government -- the Palestinian Authority -- that runs the affairs of close to half of the West Bank, including all of its Arab cities. This

administration works with Israel on security and other issues -- something that was inconceivable before 1993. The Palestinians have been able to use this proto-government to attract billions of dollars in economic support and enhance their international position.

Israel has gained as well. Its peace treaty with Jordan was a direct result of Oslo, and it has also established quasi-diplomatic and economic relations with several Arab countries. Despite the hiatus in those ties during the second Palestinian intifada (2000-2004), a modicum of quiet economic relations between Israel and Persian Gulf states has returned. More broadly, the post-Oslo gush of foreign investment into Israel has been key to the country's high-tech boom, which remains central to its economy. Meanwhile, despite ongoing tensions in the Israeli-Palestinian relationship and widespread turmoil in the region as a whole, violence has dropped sharply in the West Bank as a result of Oslo, especially since President Mahmoud Abbas came to office eight years ago and Israel constructed its security barrier. Of course, if the nonviolent approach is somehow discredited and Abbas fully leaves the political stage, this relative quiet could end.

SHORTCOMINGS

Oslo's shortcomings are not to be dismissed, of course. The Palestinians would note that a two-state solution has yet to materialize in part because Oslo deferred the core issues (e.g., the final territorial contours of a West Bank state). In addition, the accords did not stop Israeli settlement activity, thereby bolstering Israeli spoilers.

For their part, Israelis would note that Oslo failed to create peace education programs to foster new attitudes among the next

generation of Palestinians, dashing hopes that reconciliation between the two peoples could accompany final negotiations between the two governments. Oslo also failed to prevent a bloody four-year intifada that claimed many Israeli and Palestinian lives and increased the potency of Palestinian rejectionism.

Indeed, this mixed legacy has implications for negotiators today, most notably deep skepticism of the other side's intentions. In a recent "Peace Index" poll by Tel Aviv University and the Israel Democracy Institute, 41 percent of Israeli Jews said that the two-state solution is dead, and 78 percent did not believe that the Palestinians would see the signing of a peace agreement as the end of the conflict. Likewise, according to the Ramallah-based Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, 69 percent of Palestinians believe that they will still be stateless five years from now, while 82 percent believe that Israel's long-term goal is to annex the West Bank.

In light of these attitudes, leaders on both sides have been risk-averse. Instead of counting on the type of visionary leadership seen in the past (e.g., by Anwar Sadat and Yitzhak Rabin), Israelis and Palestinians will have to change the cost-benefit analysis of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and President Abbas if they truly want an agreement. Wary of going too far out ahead of their publics, the leaders will need to engage the people and address the other side in order to improve public support and, in turn, give themselves sufficient political confidence to make tough policy decisions.

MORAL BANKRUPTCY OF "ONE-STATE" PROPOSALS

Oslo's relevancy has also endured because those who dislike its core idea -- partitioning the West Bank into two entities, one Israeli and one Palestinian -- have been unable to come up with

a viable, just alternative. Jordan adamantly refuses to negotiate territorial issues on behalf of the Palestinians for fear of being sucked into the vortex of Israeli-Palestinian tensions, so a more radical proposal has emerged in some academic circles: a one-state solution. According to this idea, Israel would agree to its own destruction, as would the Palestinian Authority. In their place would be established a binational, democratic state of Israeli Jews and Arabs from Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. Currently, polls indicate that only around 8 percent of Israelis support the one-state model (largely from the far left and far right), while Palestinian support stands at 29 percent. Neither number carries significant political weight given the nature of Israeli and Palestinian politics. In contrast, clear majorities on both sides support a two-state solution, while prominent figures have vehemently dismissed the one-state idea. In June, for example, Oslo architect and leading Israeli dove Yossi Beilin called the notion "deranged," saying that no Zionist leader would accept a one-state arrangement: "Any such leader will prevent a situation in which a Jewish minority rules over a Palestinian majority. I predict that a center-left leader would prefer to cut the Gordian knot through a peace treaty with the Palestinians, based upon the spirit of the Clinton Parameters from 2000 and the Geneva Initiative of 2003, whereas a center-right leader would prefer to do so through a unilateral withdrawal to the security barrier built by former Likud leader Ariel Sharon."

Similarly, Israeli statesman Abba Eban ridiculed the one-state idea during his lifetime, noting that Israelis and Palestinians speak different languages, come from different cultures, and do not share common daily experiences. Moreover, they have been traumatized by each other via Palestinian terrorism and Israeli

control of the West Bank.

Some academics have attempted to argue that the emergence of binationalism is part of a wider trend to end longstanding strife between ethnic states. Yet there has been no movement to combine states in clearly similar situations, such as India and Pakistan. And the binational state of Lebanon has largely been a failure -- its people have suffered a fifteen-year civil war and growing sectarian tensions despite being Arab and speaking a common language.

Indeed, the odds are that a one-state solution would only intensify the far more obvious differences between Jews and Arabs rather than resolving the conflict. Both groups would surely seek to gain the upper hand in such a state. For example, one can easily imagine Palestinians seeking to open the shared state to descendants of Palestinian refugees in the hope of spurring Jewish citizens to flee, just as other minorities have been forced out of the Middle East by intolerant forces. In this regard, binationalism dovetails with the idea outlined in the original PLO Charter, which called for a secular democratic state but declared that Jews who did not live in Palestine before 1917 were to be expelled. It also fits with the ideology of many Islamists, who believe that Jews should have no rights to the holy land. Even Edward Said, a leading intellectual proponent of a one-state solution, expressed concern about its potential impact on Israeli Jews: "It worries me a great deal. The question of what is going to be the fate of the Jews is very difficult for me. I really don't know." In short, far from solving the problem, binationalism would be a recipe for constant bloodshed and endless conflict.

CONCLUSION

Although one can look at Oslo at twenty and bemoan its

shortcomings, a fuller appreciation emerges when one honestly assesses its achievements and compares the likely consequences of its alternatives. Destroying Israel and the Palestinian nationalist movement in the hope of building a new binational state is not only morally repulsive, but also a nonstarter. Any solution must account for the fact that nationalism remains a powerful force in the Middle East and cannot be ignored.

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