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AFTER THE SUMMIT: PREVENTING THE COLLAPSE OF ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN NEGOTIATIONS

Last week's Arab-Israeli summit in Washington was a foreign policy fiasco. President Bill Clinton claimed that it was a success because Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat began to talk to each other again after their negotiating dialogue had been broken off by civil disorders that claimed the lives of 15 Israelis and 59 Palestinians. But talking, by definition, is what happens at a summit. The real test of the Washington summit was whether Clinton could take concrete action to advance the American goal of building a secure and stable Arab-Israeli peace—and here the talks failed miserably. There was no substantive agreement, and the only outcome was procedural—a decision to undertake non-stop negotiations beginning October 6 at the Erez border crossing between Israel and Gaza.

There was so little agreement that the two sides were unable even to hammer out a joint statement. Instead, at the summit's conclusion, President Clinton read a maddeningly vague statement that failed to condemn the political violence that had derailed the negotiations, despite the fact that such violence—particularly armed attacks by the Palestinian police—violated the September 1993 Israeli-Palestinian peace accord signed at the White House. Moreover, Clinton's statement included a weak and unseemly plea to the violent Palestinian mobs that endanger the fragile peace negotiations, asking them to give the summit participants "more time."

This timid entreaty ignores the fact that the Palestinian civil disorders were not a spontaneous reaction to the September 23 opening of a second exit to an archaeological tunnel in Jerusalem; they were orchestrated by Arafat, who used the official Palestinian television and radio stations to incite his followers. The Palestinian leader charged falsely that the tunnel somehow defiled Muslim holy sites located 250 yards away. Arafat undoubtedly hoped to exploit the ensuing violence to undermine Prime Minister Netanyahu's domestic political support, isolate him abroad, and drive a wedge between Israel and the United States that could help strengthen the Palestinian bargaining position in future negotiations with Israel. This strategy can work only if the outside world buys into it by blaming Israel for Arafat's brinkmanship. Clinton should have made it clear to Arafat that exploiting political violence to gain negotiating leverage is unacceptable and will doom the negotiations if tried again.

The Washington summit also dealt a setback to U.S. foreign policy by squandering the prestige and credibility of an American President on a risky, unscripted diplomatic enterprise. The summit's prospects for success were marred by inadequate advance preparation and the lack of a clear negotiating agenda, and its inconclusive results will undermine American policy in the Middle East by leading U.S. allies and adversaries in the region to question the wisdom and skill of American policymakers at the highest levels. This is particularly damaging, coming on the heels of President Clinton's weak response to Saddam Hussein's violation of the Kurdish safe haven in August.

A more prudent response to the Israeli-Palestinian crisis would have been for Secretary of State Warren Christopher to take the lead as a diplomatic troubleshooter, holding presidential involvement in reserve as a last resort. The failure of the Washington summit is likely to undercut Clinton's ability to convene another emergency

summit in the future, thereby limiting U.S. options in the event of another crisis in Arab-Israeli relations. In the future, the Clinton Administration should rule out such diplomatic high-wire acts and make every effort to avoid engaging the prestige of the presidency unless some diplomatic progress is assured in advance.

In the aftermath of the summit, the U.S. should modify its approach to promoting peace to reflect the fact that negotiations have been severely disrupted, if not destroyed altogether, by the recent political violence. The cornerstone of the Oslo agreement, negotiated by Israel and the PLO in Norway in August 1993, was Palestinian renunciation of the "armed struggle" in return for Israeli recognition and an opportunity to gain gradually increasing authority over an incrementally growing slice of territory. The recent violence, especially the participation of some of the 30,000 Palestinian police, threatens the viability of the Oslo process.

The ailing peace negotiations need major surgery, not a cosmetic facelift. This urgent operation requires the agreement and close cooperation of the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli government. The U.S. cannot impose a solution, but it must assist the two sides to reach a durable agreement. To do so, the Clinton Administration should:

- **Make bolstering security against terrorism the highest priority.** More than 230 Israelis have been killed by terrorists since the September 1993 peace accord, compared with 209 killed in the entire decade before the agreement was signed on the White House lawn. Prime Minister Netanyahu has pledged to continue along the Oslo negotiating track, but seeks to renegotiate parts of the original agreement to enhance Israeli security. The U.S. should sympathize with this approach, especially since the Palestinian police—presumed at Oslo to be an anti-terrorist force—have proved unreliable. Washington also should encourage the two sides to negotiate improved security arrangements for the 450 Israeli settlers in Hebron, the last Palestinian city under Israeli control, that provide for Israeli military redeployment within (but not from) that tense city.
- **Insist that Yasser Arafat suppress terrorism and cease his inflammatory rhetoric.** Arafat's police intermittently crack down on Hamas (the Islamic Resistance Movement) and other terrorist groups opposed to peace negotiations and then seek to co-opt them by releasing their members from prison. If he expects to be treated as a reliable negotiating partner, Arafat must comply consistently and fully with his obligation under the Oslo agreement to halt terrorism, take action to purge his police force of those that fired on Israelis, stop using political violence as a negotiating tactic, and cease his calls for a jihad (holy war).
- **Stretch out the negotiating timetable.** The Oslo process established a five-year period of Palestinian self-government that would allow the two sides to build confidence in each other before they resolved the most contentious issues, such as Palestinian statehood, the demarcation of borders, the status of Jerusalem, the future of Israeli settlements, and the question of Palestinian refugees. These thorny issues were not scheduled to be negotiated until the final status talks, slated to start at the beginning of the third year of Palestinian self-government. It was hoped that both sides by then would gain the political flexibility needed to make difficult compromises. However, the experiment in coexistence has turned into a nightmare for Israelis, who have become less willing to take risks for peace.

To salvage the chances for a stable peace, the negotiating deadline for reaching a final status agreement should be stretched out past the current 1999 target date. Final status talks should begin as soon as possible, but the two sides should be freed from deadline pressures to enable them to reach a workable agreement without being rushed. This will give the Palestinian Authority more time to prove that it is willing and able to cooperate with Israel in rooting out terrorism. Moreover, it will take at least a generation to lay a solid foundation for a durable peace. Pressing the two sides to rush to meet the 1999 deadline when most other deadlines set by the Oslo agreement have been missed is unrealistic and could jeopardize the chances for a genuine peace.

The U.S. must focus on its long-term goal of helping to build a stable and secure Arab-Israeli peace, and not become bogged down in obsessively advancing a "peace process" that is doomed to failure unless its security flaws are rectified. While Washington should continue to serve as an honest broker in the negotiations, it must bear in mind that Israel is a close ally whose vital security requirements should not be sacrificed for Palestinian promises that too often go unfulfilled.

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