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THE FLOUNDERING OSLO PEACE PROCESS

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The Clinton Administration, concerned about the floundering Israeli–Palestinian peace negotiations begun in Oslo, Norway, in 1993, has issued an ultimatum to Israel and precipitated an artificial crisis in the negotiations that may hinder efforts to achieve a stable and lasting peace. On May 5, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright announced that the United States would convene an Israeli–Palestinian summit in Washington on May 11 only if Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accepted the American proposal—one he previously had rejected for security reasons—that Israel withdraw from 13 percent of the disputed territories, revive the dormant final status talks, and accept a new set of U.S.-monitored Palestinian security measures. Netanyahu balked at this precondition for a summit, but the Administration continues to press him to acquiesce to its plan to hold an Israeli–Palestinian summit in Washington later this month.

In its rush for a new agreement, the Administration has glossed over the Palestinian Authority's failure to comply with past agreements. If the dying Oslo peace negotiations are to be revived, the Palestinians must abide fully by their commitments. The Administration should insist that Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat rigorously comply with previous agreements before it asks Netanyahu to accept additional risks to attain a future agreement.

Real Obstacles to Peace. The Administration has singled out Netanyahu as the primary obstacle blocking the negotiating progress. By issuing a summit invitation on a take-it-or-leave-it basis (after Arafat reluctantly agreed to appear) and by warning that the United States would “reexamine” its approach to the peace process if Netanyahu did

not fall into line, Albright made it clear that the Administration was willing to risk damaging U.S.–Israeli relations. In its obsession with advancing the peace “process,” the Administration tends to treat as moral equivalents both Israel, a long-time ally, and Arafat's Palestinian forces that have been responsible for numerous terrorist attacks against Americans.

Netanyahu considers peace to be a goal, not a process. He is more concerned with where the peace process is going than with how to keep it moving. More than 260 Israelis have been murdered by Palestinian terrorists since the September 1993 signing of the Oslo Declaration of Principles, compared with 209 in the decade before that agreement was signed at the White House. This begs the question of what kind of peace the Oslo negotiations ultimately will yield.

Continued Palestinian terrorism, not Netanyahu, is the primary obstacle to peace. Arafat has failed to keep his Oslo commitments to fight terrorism by systematically cracking down on radical Palestinian groups violently opposed to the negotiations. Instead, the Palestinian police have intermittently arrested Islamic militants after terrorist attacks to

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placate the Israelis, and then quietly released them or allowed them to “escape.” The police force, expanded far beyond the 24,000 personnel permitted by the 1995 Oslo II agreement, contains an estimated 150 members of extremist groups opposed to peace with Israel; at least 25 are wanted by Israel for terrorist crimes. Moreover, Palestinian police have been involved covertly in terrorist attacks against Israelis since the 1993 Oslo accords. The Palestinians have refused to extradite known terrorists accused of murders on Israeli soil—another violation of the Oslo accords.

In addition to his past record of violating the letter and spirit of the Oslo accords, Arafat’s bellicose rhetoric reinforces Israeli doubts about his intentions. He has praised suicide bombers as “martyrs” and has called repeatedly for a jihad (holy war) to liberate Jerusalem. He has failed to purge the Palestinian Covenant, the charter of the Palestine Liberation Organization, of its calls for violence and the destruction of Israel, despite the fact that he agreed to do so under the terms of the 1993 Oslo agreement, the 1995 Oslo II agreement, and the 1997 Hebron protocol. This obstinate refusal to fulfill his pledges fuels Israeli suspicions that Arafat will revert to the “war process” after he has extracted all he can from the “peace process.”

A Better U.S. Policy. Given the long record of Palestinian violations of past agreements, it is not surprising that Prime Minister Netanyahu is reluctant to rush into a new agreement that will entail concrete Israeli concessions of land in return for unreliable Palestinian promises of security cooperation. Now that its gamble to jump start the negotiations by issuing an ultimatum to Netanyahu has failed, the Administration should:

- **Insist that Arafat fulfill his past commitments before asking Netanyahu to take on new commitments.** Pushing for new agreements when old ones continue to be violated with impunity makes no sense. The peace negotiations are doomed unless Arafat complies with his agreements to halt terrorism, cooperate with Israeli security forces, amend

the Palestinian Covenant, cease his inflammatory rhetoric, and stop using political violence as a negotiating tactic.

- **Stretch out the negotiating timetable.** The Oslo accords established a five-year period of Palestinian self-government that would allow the two sides to build confidence in each other before tackling the most contentious issues in the final status talks. The deadline for concluding the final status talks should be extended past the current May 1999 target date. Pressing the two sides to meet this deadline when most other deadlines set by the Oslo accords have been missed is unrealistic and could jeopardize chances for a genuine peace.
- **Warn Arafat against unilaterally declaring Palestinian statehood.** Arafat has threatened to declare the establishment of a Palestinian state if the Israelis do not agree to it by May 1999. This would violate the Oslo accords and diminish the prospects for a stable peace. Unfortunately, Hillary Clinton’s May 6 statement that it would be in the “long term interests of the Middle East for Palestine to become a state” has reduced the perceived repercussions of such a move. The Administration should scramble to repair the damage inflicted by this gratuitous statement and make it clear that a unilateral assertion of statehood is unacceptable.

The “land for peace” deal at the heart of the Oslo accords has turned into a “land for the promise of peace” charade. Peace negotiations are doomed unless Arafat delivers on his Oslo commitments; thus, Washington should demand that Arafat comply fully with past agreements before it asks Israel to take on further risks. As a long-time ally, Israel deserves America’s diplomatic support and close cooperation, not an ultimatum for an unrealistic immediate military withdrawal that will exacerbate terrorist threats to Israeli security.

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