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BUILDING BRIDGES ON SAND: CLINTON'S DUBIOUS MIDDLE EAST PEACE INITIATIVE

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President Bill Clinton's misguided last-gasp effort to revive the moribund Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations is not likely to succeed. His proposal is fraught with risk and jeopardizes Israel's security while rewarding Palestinians for intransigence and terrorism. In his rush to salvage his image as a peacemaker, President Clinton is repeating mistakes he made at the failed Camp David summit last July. The chasm between the two sides is still too great to close in the waning days of his Administration, and Clinton should not make ill-advised promises that another Administration will have to fulfill merely to secure a dubious and fundamentally flawed agreement.

Clinton's Shaky Bridge. President Clinton's "bridging proposal" is designed to close immense gaps between the Palestinian and Israeli positions on a number of issues. Once again, however, Clinton is pressing Israel to make critical concessions that would severely undermine its security without creating the foundation for stable and lasting peace—rigorous Palestinian compliance with the terms of the 1993 Oslo accords, including an end to terrorism and political violence. Despite Yasser Arafat's unwillingness to make concessions and his violations of the Oslo agreement by orchestrating low-intensity warfare against Israel and ending security cooperation, the Clinton proposal calls for unprecedented Israeli concessions in return for Palestinian promises. But as Arafat has shown so often

in the past, Palestinian promises can be discarded at a moment's notice.

At Camp David, President Clinton advised Israel to surrender approximately 90 percent of the West Bank to the Palestinians and called for an Israeli military presence along the border with Jordan for a period of 21 years. In his new proposal, he has upped the West Bank ante to 94 to 96 percent and proposes only a six-year deployment along the border, despite the fact that in a crisis this region could become Israel's border with Iraq. To help offset the risks this entails for Israel, Clinton is proposing a vaguely defined "international presence" of peacekeeping monitors. But such a presence, long desired by Arafat to weaken Israel's position, is anathema to most Israelis. The ineffective U.N. peacekeeping forces stationed in the Sinai peninsula before the 1967 war and in Lebanon were a bitter disappointment; Israelis naturally want to retain responsibility for their own security.

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President Clinton also broke precedent in the new agreement, suggesting that the Israelis concede control over part of Jerusalem, including the Temple Mount—the most sacred of Jewish holy sites. Such an abdication would jeopardize access to Judaism's principal religious and historical sites, undermine the legitimacy of the Zionist state, and likely transform the capital into another Belfast. According to the chief of staff of Israel's armed forces, the Clinton proposal would irreparably damage Israel's security. Clinton also essentially recognized the right of more than 3.5 million Palestinian refugees to claim entry into Israel, and the right of Israel to refuse them entry. This formulation would spur tensions and could give Palestinians a pretext for backing out of any agreement down the road. Incredibly, the issue of Palestinian terrorism, the chief roadblock to a lasting peace, has not been directly addressed in Clinton's new proposal.

Both the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority reportedly believe Clinton's proposal is doomed. For one thing, there simply is not enough time to hammer out the details before Clinton leaves office. But neither side wants to be held responsible for its failure, so each continues to go through the diplomatic motions. Even if lame-duck Prime Minister Ehud Barak succumbs to Clinton's proposal to shore up his crumbling political status before the February 6 Israeli elections, the Israeli parliament is certain to reject the Clinton proposal. Discredited by the concessions he made in the last round of negotiations, Barak retains the support of only about 30 of the Knesset's 120 members. Last week, his own attorney general even questioned his "moral authority" to conduct such fateful negotiations in the run-up to Israel's elections.

Clinton's proposals are also politically unacceptable to the Palestinians, who obstinately maintain their maximalist demands. They are in no mood for compromise thanks to Arafat's constant appeals for a jihad (holy war) against Israel, which long predated the current violence. Given the past success of Arafat's brinkmanship and use of violence, which has garnered him substantial Israeli concessions under American pressure, Arafat has little incentive to make genuine concessions to Israel now. He also

recognizes that both Clinton and Barak cannot guarantee that their respective successors will deliver on the concessions they now make.

Building Peace on Quicksand. President Clinton's overly ambitious diplomacy is mistakenly premised on the importance of his personal ties to Arafat and Barak, which demonstrates both an overconfidence in his own ability to pull an agreement out of his diplomatic hat and a gross underestimation of Arafat's ruthless willingness to use terrorism and unrest to obtain more concessions. By continuing to pursue peace at any price, Clinton is repeating mistakes he made at last July's disastrous summit—trying to induce Israel to concede too much too soon for too little from the Palestinians and pressing ahead without adequate diplomatic groundwork. This approach damages not only his own credibility and prestige, but those of the United States as well. Moreover, raising Arab expectations only to dash them heightens tensions and increases the risk of war. And if Barak were to sign an agreement subsequently rejected by the Knesset, Arafat would secure a propaganda victory that would further isolate Israel and could trigger a regional war.

The incoming Bush Administration has little choice but to distance itself from President Clinton's shaky proposal and stress that it will lapse when Clinton leaves office. The President-elect should privately warn President Clinton not to make commitments, such as economic bribes or promising U.S. peacekeeping troops, upon which only the next Administration and a skeptical Congress can deliver. Washington must fundamentally rethink an appeasement policy that has raised Palestinian expectations, whetted Arafat's appetite for concessions, and led the Oslo process into a diplomatic dead end. The only way to salvage the peace negotiations is to discard wishful thinking, hold the Palestinian Authority to its Oslo commitments, and end Palestinian terrorism and mob thuggery.

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