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The (Hillary) Clinton Outline: A Fundamental Turning Point?

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In her December 10 speech at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton surveyed the current state of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in light of the administration's failure to renew direct talks between the two parties. This failure has led to severe criticism of the Obama administration.

At the start of her address, Clinton made it clear that the administration is not looking to arrive at a limited interim agreement between the sides; rather, its sights are set on a full, comprehensive settlement that would also include a set of understandings and arrangements with the greater Arab world. The time has come, she stressed, to handle the core issues of the conflict: borders (the top priority) and security, settlements, water, refugees, and Jerusalem.

With the desire to portray a balanced stance and shirk the image of an administration that is unsympathetic – perhaps even hostile – towards Israel, Clinton used terms that appear to match Prime Minister Netanyahu's positions and demands. At least twice she made it clear that the administration's goal is to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict "once and for all." One senses that Clinton was trying to send Netanyahu a message that she identifies with his stance, whereby a settlement must be "final" and put an end to Palestinian demands of Israel.

The clarifications made by Secretary Clinton that the administration views Israel as "the historic homeland of the Jewish people" also sent a message of identification with Prime Minister's Netanyahu's demand that the Palestinian Authority recognize Israel as the state of the Jewish people and the historic link of the Jewish people to the land of Israel.

The United States, said Clinton, is not satisfied with making only verbal gestures towards Israel. During President Obama's term in office, strategic and security relations between the two nations have been expanded and strengthened to an unprecedented degree. Moreover, "the United States will always be there when Israel is threatened...America's commitment to Israel's security and its future is rock solid and unwavering."

An additional point referred to the need for comprehensive regional peace; the Israeli-Palestinian settlement would be just one part of this broader framework. In this context, she called on the nations of the region to give the Arab peace initiative a broader and

more concrete form. Almost certainly, the meaning was to expand normalization with Israel.

After the preliminaries, Clinton got to the point: the need to advance the peace process. She stressed that realizing the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinians is not only in the best interests of the Palestinians but also in the best interests of Israel and the United States. Referring indirectly and critically to the theory of growth from the ground up advocated by Prime Minister Netanyahu, she said: "While economic and institutional progress [in the PA] is important, indeed necessary, it is not a substitute for a political resolution." In other words, anyone who thinks otherwise is taking an erroneous and dangerous approach. The United States is committed to realizing the legitimate rights of the Palestinians; the lack of progress in this direction is unacceptable from the administration's point of view.

In this context, Clinton stressed that the United States will also push the parties to present their proposals and stances on the core issues without delay and with appropriate details. The United States, she added, will not be satisfied only with that. At the right opportunity and in the framework of the discrete dialogue underway with each of the parties, the United States will not hesitate to present its own bridging proposals.

And as if to clarify that this time the administration is more serious than in the past and that it will no longer allow any foot-dragging, Clinton began to lay out the administration's positions on the core issues. The first issue she chose to deal with – certainly not by chance – was the border issue. Thereby, she sent a message to Israel that the administration tends to accept the Palestinian position whereby it is necessary to begin by discussing the borders rather than what Israel wants – to talk about security arrangements.

Secretary Clinton went further still. She emphasized that the area between the Jordan and the Mediterranean must be divided between the parties such that each party would know which part belonged to whom. A clear, agreed-upon border must exist between the two parties. At the same time, she sent an explicit message of understanding of Israel's security needs in light of Israel's bitter experience in its withdrawals from the Gaza Strip and Lebanon. She stressed that the borders must "not leave Israel vulnerable. Security arrangements must prevent any resurgence of terrorism."

The question of Jerusalem, Clinton said, is most difficult and sensitive. The parties must understand that not only they but also many believers around the world take an interest in Jerusalem; their interests must also be considered in the context of a settlement to be reached on this issue. Herein perhaps lies more than a hint of the need for an international arrangement over Jerusalem. In the past, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert already proposed such an arrangement to the Palestinians. Secretary of State Clinton was almost certainly referring to an arrangement of this sort.

Thus after tense anticipation on how the Obama administration intends to jumpstart the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the forward approach was disclosed. The various

assessments circulating that the bitter disappointments that had befallen the Obama administration in the last two years, damaging its prestige, and the difficult domestic issues it faces would lead it to moderate its involvement in the peace process were highly exaggerated. The administration is far from throwing up its hands in the air. On the contrary, it has every intention of deepening its involvement in reaching a settlement.

Hillary Clinton's address – and even more so, its formulation and her body language – lend little doubt that the Obama administration is losing its patience with the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Clinton's speech sends a clear message that the United States is determined to get to the point, the sooner the better, and to formulate clear positions on the core issues, leaving aside tactical and procedural issues. After failed attempts to bring the parties to negotiate directly, the administration has reached the conclusion that direct talks under the present circumstances will not lead to practical, immediate results in the direction of a settlement. The United States must assume responsibility for formulating positions and to bring about their adoption by both parties. This is a clear change in the line of action of the administration on the peace process.

Secretary Clinton made it unequivocally clear that the American administration cannot impose a solution on the parties. Even if it could, she said, it "would not, because it is only a negotiated agreement between the parties that will be sustainable. The parties themselves have to want it. The people of the region must decide to move beyond a past that cannot change and embrace a future they can shape together." It is unlikely that these soothing words, directed at Israel, will allay the concerns within Israel's leadership about an administration attempt to impose a settlement on Israel based on the parameters of both Clintons' outline.

The main question of course is how the administration will translate this determination into practice. Its obvious internal weakness – in light of the economic crisis, Wikileaks, the failure in the Congressional elections, and the upcoming presidential primaries – will undoubtedly make it difficult to operate with the required determination to implement this outline.

The fact that the present outline was presented by the Secretary of State may indicate that at least at this stage President Obama is seeking to avoid being personally identified with a move whose chances of success are far from certain. In the last two years President Obama has taken several hard blows over his handling of the Israeli-Palestinian settlement. Another failure, at a time when the race for the White House is starting, is liable to damage his chances for reelection.