

Obama must deal with important questions of the Mideast conflict

By Zvi Bar'el

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For 41 years, Washington turned a blind eye. It protested a bit, scolded a bit, and mostly made do with periodically stating that its policy has not changed - it still opposes settlements in the territories and does not recognize the annexation of East Jerusalem or the Golan Heights. Suddenly, it gave us a resounding slap, but one of the frustrating kind that misses the cheek and flies through empty air. Because the American demand that we freeze construction in the settlements, that "strong message" containing a threat, has become a personal duel between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and U.S. President Barack Obama, in place of a clear policy presented by the latter.

Obama will win, of course. He can set a meeting with Netanyahu late at night, not answer the prime minister's phone calls, warn him from the Great Wall of China and even order his officials to give Israel's requests the cold shoulder. Obama already has managed to garner international support for his demand that Israel freeze settlement construction, even in Jerusalem, and American public opinion is on his side. If Obama wants to undermine Israel's trust in the United States, or to prove to Netanyahu who is stronger, he does not have to work hard.

The American demand is proper, even if it is very late and unusually aggressive. However, its lack of context is infuriating. Freezing settlements is not a policy. Its entire purpose is to give Mahmoud Abbas, the resigning Palestinian Authority president, a reason to get back to negotiations. But negotiations cannot be a final goal, just as freezing settlements cannot be considered the ultimate achievement. What then? Is Abbas doomed to be a constant negotiator in endless negotiations? Does Washington have a plan for continuing negotiations?

And let's say Israel does freeze construction. What is Washington's policy regarding the 300,000 settlers currently living in the territories, in settlements that no American president was determined enough to stop? If a plan to construct 900 housing units in Gilo bothers Obama, what does he think about the 40,000 Israelis already living there? What is the point in demanding a construction freeze if it does not involve a comprehensive plan that determines the borders between Israel and Palestine, and where Jews can or can't live? After all, that will be the next question in negotiations, to which end Obama has Netanyahu in a pincer grip.

Without a solid American diplomatic plan that will make Israelis, not Netanyahu, understand how to keep negotiations from bogging down a moment after Abbas and Netanyahu start talking; without a clear American position on the Palestinian right of return and the holy places, and whether Washington is for or against Palestinian

reconciliation that brings Hamas into the government; the settlement freeze will become an unnecessary test of strength between Netanyahu and Obama. Because if the American president takes the trouble to look into one illegal building in East Jerusalem, and rightly so, he cannot in the same breath say that the really important questions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are none of his business.

Washington can no longer call itself an indifferent mediator who gives the parties the White House phone number and asks that they call when they are ready, as secretary of state James Baker did when George H.W. Bush was president. Washington is a stakeholder, and peace in the Middle East is its strategic interest. As such, it cannot present freezing settlements as a personal power play, an ego contest, insulted that its client state is disobedient.

It is increasingly, seeming that the demand for a settlement freeze is no more than a desire to chalk up some sort of achievement, one that does not change the status quo but does grant prestige. That suspicion is based on the fact that the United States has had nothing to say about the Israeli-Syrian conflict. If peace in the Middle East is so important, why is Washington not speaking out about the settlements in the Golan Heights? Why does the United States not call a Syrian-Israeli summit? Are negotiations with Syrian President Bashar Assad less important than those with Abbas? The Arab peace initiative, it should be noted, involves Israeli withdrawal from all the territories.

The freeze in settlement construction is an essential step in a meaningful peace plan. Standing alone, it is a hollow gesture.

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