

Commentary

Learning from Clinton's Mideast Mistakes

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In 1974, Yasser Arafat delivered a famous address to the United Nations in which he said: "Today I have come bearing an olive branch and a freedom fighter's gun. Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand." It was meant as an implicit threat, and it underlined one of the dangers of the peace process: there was value in the two sides talking, but Arafat's side promised to resort to violence if unsatisfied with the talks.

Arafat fulfilled his promise repeatedly over the years, but never more famously or with more damage to long-term prospects for peace than after the failure of the Clinton administration's Camp David summit in 2000. At a debate hosted by Intelligence Squared US on Tuesday night, one of the negotiators involved in that summit, Aaron David Miller, said this:

In July 2000, we decided to recommend to Bill Clinton to go to Camp David to try to create a conflict-ending solution between Israelis and Palestinians. Do you realize that a dozen years after that summit, we are still paying for the lack of wisdom and the recklessness of that decision? Israelis and Palestinians have not yet recovered from the trauma of those ten years, because we believed in an effort to do something in the face of a desperate situation, that we could make it better. This notion is reckless, and it's not well thought through.

The wisdom of the Bush administration that followed was to recognize—though without saying it explicitly—just how much the Clinton administration had wrecked the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. It's nice to see Miller—who, by the way, encouraged the reelection of Barack Obama Tuesday night—admit it as well.

But the question now is, what should be done instead? That was the topic of the debate, which was entitled: "The U.N. should admit Palestine as a full member state." It pitted, for the motion, Palestinian legislator Mustafa Barghouthi and the New America Foundation and J Street's Daniel Levy against Israeli diplomat Dore Gold and Miller.

The whole debate is worth watching, which can be done at Intelligence Squared's website. But, aside from the brutal honesty about some of the worst features of Clinton's diplomatic destruction in the Middle East, one aspect jumped out at me. Barghouthi and Levy made it clear the main goal of U.N. recognition would be to immediately declare the 1949 armistice lines as official borders and

deem every last Israeli over those lines—including in Jerusalem—an illegal nuisance over whom the PLO now had sovereignty.

Both Miller and Gold raised this point out of concern that borders should be negotiated, not declared, and that if the Palestinians declare their borders then Israel will have every right to do the same—and in fact would be forced to out of an obligation to protect Jews living in an area the Palestinians have deemed should be Judenrein the moment such borders are set.

Gold was asked why the declaration of a Palestinian state at the U.N. would necessarily set those borders. Gold responded: “Well, what if the very resolution itself states that the borders will be the June 4 [1967] lines? Is the Palestinian side willing to relinquish that phraseology from a Security Council resolution?”

In response, Barghouthi tried valiantly to avoid answering the question, but moderator John Donvan pressed him on each dodge. Finally, Barghouthi said this: “I think there are four issues for negotiation. There is settlements, there is the borders, there is the issue of refugees, there is the issue of Jerusalem. Nobody said that admitting us to the U.N. will mean that we will not negotiate about all these issues.”

In other words, no, he would not agree to drop the June 4, 1967 lines from the resolution. He then said this: “As one final point, please, it’s very dangerous to say we admit, we accept Palestinian[s], that they should have a state, but we don’t agree with ‘67 borders because what that means is that you want us to have a Bantustan like there was in South Africa.”

There went any hint Barghouthi would be willing to fulfill an agreement even Arafat agreed to, which was to make borders subject to final-status negotiations.

It should be clear why this is significantly more dangerous than even the formulation that the two sides should agree to set the 1949/67 lines as the basis for negotiations and go from there. The Palestinian insistence on pulling this stunt at the U.N. tells you why the U.S. is so vehemently opposed to it. As Miller suggested, the pain and suffering inflicted upon the Israelis and Palestinians by the foolhardy Clinton administration is no excuse to encourage its desperate sequel.