

- The Daily Caller – Breaking News, Opinion, Research, and Entertainment - <http://dailycaller.com> -

## Obama's Middle East policy stalls

Posted By [Yarden Gazit](#) On January 28, 2010 @ 3:31 am In [DC Exclusive Sidebar](#), [DC Exclusives](#), [Sub2: World](#), [World](#) | [1 Comment](#)

President Barack Obama told Time Magazine's Joe Klein this week that the Middle East peace process "has not moved forward." He admitted his administration overestimated its ability to persuade Israelis and Palestinians to engage in negotiations which run contrary to each side's domestic politics. "If we had anticipated some of [the] political problems on both sides earlier, we might not have raised expectations as high," said Obama. Nevertheless, he said, "we are going to continue working with both parties to recognize what I think is ultimately their deep-seated interest in a two-state solution."

Why did the president, his Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and his Middle East envoy former Senator George Mitchell fail to anticipate the difficulties of the past year? Were there people who warned them that their policy might fail, and, if so, why did they not listen? Klein did not ask and the president did not elaborate. A look back into Obama's first days in office shows that there were plenty of warnings. But they came from people the president was not willing to take seriously.

The first and most important warning came from Israelis and Palestinians themselves. A poll conducted by the Steinmetz Center for Peace Research at Tel Aviv University in December 2008, weeks before Obama took office, showed that only 26 percent of Israelis believed negotiations would lead to a peace agreement within a few years, versus 72 percent who did not. During the election campaign in Israel held in the first weeks of the Obama administration, peace was not even an issue raised by any major party.

On the Palestinian side things were not much better. Split between a Fatah-controlled West Bank and a Hamas-controlled Gaza, peace was not on the Palestinian agenda. Hamas was recovering from its vicious conflict with Israel. Fatah's Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, who had little hope of reaching a deal with Israel, was working on his unilateral state-building plan.

Obama did not need to travel to the Middle East to realize his engagement policy would not succeed there. Experts at D.C.'s think tanks made the same point. On Jan. 12, 2009, J. D. Crouch II, Montgomery C. Meigs, and Walter B. Slocombe from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy expressed skepticism toward Obama's approach in an op-ed in the Washington Post. "Even before the breakdown of the Gaza cease-fire last month," they wrote, "Israelis and Palestinians were exhausted, bitter and skeptical that a genuine partner for peace existed. The trust that the Oslo process intended to build collapsed ... A major diplomatic initiative pressuring the parties to make concessions — or imposing the terms of an agreement — clearly will not work."

On Jan. 15, Danielle Pletka of the American Enterprise Institute argued that even if the Obama administration will succeed in bringing both sides to the negotiating table, peace will not result: "The players in the region will do what they have done for the last 50 years: serve their own interests, advance their hold on power, build up their weapons systems and marshal their forces for another decade of battle." Later that month, James Phillips of the Heritage Foundation made a similar point when he warned that "the breakdown of the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations was not the result of America's lack of engagement ... American engagement cannot deliver progress toward peace if the situation is not ripe for resolution."

Why, in spite of all the warnings, did president Obama tell Al-Arabiya at the end of January that "the most important thing is for the United States to get engaged right away?" Perhaps he believed that, like a recent Washington Post editorial argued, "Middle East history shows that even unproductive negotiations are better than none." Here too, he would have done well to listen to some Washington policy experts. Leon Hadar of the Cato Institute, for example, wrote in his 2005 book "Sandstorm: Policy Failure in the Middle East" that American involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict "not only raises expectations that cannot be fulfilled," but also "produces disincentives for the players involved to do what they need to do ... Israelis and Palestinians assume that they should be rewarded by Washington for making concessions that are perceived as 'favors' to the Americans. At the same time, the Arab and European governments refrain from assuming responsibility for trying to help resolve the conflict."

Perhaps there was another reason for Obama's deafness to expert advice: It came from the right wing. Given George W. Bush's unpopularity, it was easy for Obama to ignore criticism from the right and claim that Republicans have made the situation worse. Now, a year after Bush left office, his policy can be examined on its merits. Two peace conferences, a "road map for peace," a Tenet Plan, a Mitchell plan (yes, the same Mitchell who is now Obama's envoy), a democratization effort that brought a radical Islamic group to win Palestinian elections, all those are George Bush's actions. Some lack of engagement.

On Friday, Giora Eiland, a former Israeli general, discussed with Israeli daily Yediot Ahronot his regional initiative that includes territorial swaps between Israel, the Palestinians, Jordan and Egypt. The conventional two-state solution, he said, will not work because "the maximum any Israeli government would be willing to give and remain in power is far less than the minimum any Palestinian government would be willing to accept and remain in power." As a result, he said, the parties can either search for a creative solution or "continue banging their heads to the wall." President Obama seems to prefer the latter. Mr. Mitchell was sent this week for another tour of the Middle East.

---

Article printed from The Daily Caller – Breaking News, Opinion, Research, and Entertainment:  
**<http://dailycaller.com>**

URL to article: **<http://dailycaller.com/2010/01/28/obamas-middle-east-policy-stalls/>**

Copyright © 2009 Daily Caller. All rights reserved.