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The neglected Israeli-Palestinian peace process must be revived

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Rarely has there been a time when less attention has been paid to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than today. Given the threat from the Islamic State, the [humanitarian catastrophe in Syria](#), proxy conflicts between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and Egypt's struggles with radical Islamists, it is hard to find anyone in Washington or the Arab capitals who is thinking about the Israelis and Palestinians. But the problem is not going away.

For the past five months, there have been more than 100 [individual Palestinian terrorist attacks](#) against Israelis. As the risk of escalation grows, both sides are becoming even more doubtful that there will ever be peace. With Palestinians divided and their leaders increasingly discredited, and a right-wing government in Israel, the conflict is not about to be resolved. But that is all the more reason to think about what can be done to preserve the possibility of a two-state outcome, particularly with the Palestinians entering a period of uncertain succession.

Any new effort must start with defusing tension and restoring a sense of possibility. Given Palestinian paralysis, the most direct way to begin changing the climate between Israelis and Palestinians may be to affect Israel's settlement policy by adopting a new approach on this contentious issue.

Not all settlements are equal. In May 2011, President Obama [gave a speech](#) in which he spoke of borders established in any peace agreement being based on the 1967 lines, with mutually agreed territorial swaps to compensate the Palestinians for the settlement blocs that the Israelis would retain. But since that time, Obama administration policy has continued to treat all [settlement activity](#) as [unacceptable](#), effectively dismissing the distinction drawn by the president. The administration's inability to differentiate between settlement activity within and outside of those blocs has actually bolstered the Israeli right, because most Israelis draw a distinction between the two. The Obama approach is seen as dismissing Israeli needs.

A differentiated approach to the settlements could alter that perception. Such an approach would be guided by the understanding that approximately 80 percent of settlers live in approximately 5 percent of the West Bank largely adjacent to the pre-1967 lines and inside the security barrier. Most of the remaining 20 percent live outside the security barrier, in 92 percent of the West Bank.

A new U.S. approach would acknowledge that building within the blocs does not change the contours of the "peace map." While not formally endorsing settlement activity, it would nonetheless seek to channel it into areas that will likely be part of Israel in any two-state outcome. In 2008, [Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas](#) implicitly acknowledged the principle of settlement blocs remaining part of Israel, offering 1.9 percent

of this territory during negotiations in return for land inside Israel.

That does not mean that Abbas would embrace a U.S. approach that drew a distinction between settlement-building inside and outside the blocs. He fears that accepting any settlement construction would be tantamount to accepting occupation. But at a time when Abbas is delivering little to his people and [polls indicate](#) that most of them believe Israel will keep taking more of the West Bank, it could be important to show that Israel will stop building in 92 percent of the territory. If Palestinian building projects in [Area C](#) — the 60 percent of the West Bank that is controlled exclusively by Israel — were permitted at the same time, Palestinians might again believe that change is possible.

Unfortunately, in the current zero-sum context, when Palestinians are regularly attacking Israelis, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would likely see such moves as unacceptable unless Israel received something meaningful in return. The Obama administration could offer several things that would matter to Netanyahu.

First, the president could promise to veto any resolution on settlements (or perceived to be anti-Israeli) at the U.N. Security Council. Second, he could agree not to present to the council a U.S. resolution on parameters for resolving the conflict. Third, he could commit to pressing our European and Arab partners to denounce Palestinian efforts against normalizing Israeli-Palestinian contacts, emphasizing that the Palestinian effort to delegitimize Israel is inconsistent with a two-state outcome. (He could also highlight the contrast between Israel adopting a settlement policy consistent with a two-state outcome and Palestinian behaviors that undermine such an option.)

But, of course, Israel would have to adopt a policy on settlements that credibly ended building outside of the blocs. In addition to Israel stating publicly that it would no longer build beyond the security barrier, we would need several private understandings to be able to fulfill our side of the bargain: First, Israel would not add construction in places on the edge of the security barrier, such as Ariel, which has 20,000 settlers and is likely to be a difficult issue in final negotiations. Second, Israel would not build in Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. Third, Israel would accept the principle of territorial exchanges or swaps.

Should Israel be willing to accept this approach, it would stem the drift toward a binational state, blunt the delegitimization movement internationally and give us leverage to block future European sanctions against Israel. It would also — after decades — remove settlements as a constant irritant to U.S.-Israel relations. The United States and Israel both have an interest in achieving these objectives but have yet to employ deft diplomacy to realize them. Isn't it time to do so and to begin to restore a sense of possibility again?