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Sent: Tuesday, November 23, 2010 11:52 PM
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Subject: Chet Crocker, Scott Lasensky, and Sam Lewis OPED on MEP
Attachments: Crocker Lasensky Lewis OPED.doc

I'm abusing my privileges and sending you two emails in one evening, [REDACTED] it hasn't been published yet. [REDACTED]

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November 2010

Declaring America's Stand on Middle East Peace

By Chester A. Crocker, Scott B. Lasensky and Samuel W. Lewis

Faltering Middle East peace talks need a jolt. Washington has a powerful option for moving the process forward: taking a firm stand on how to end the conflict.

An American declaration of principles—carefully crafted and properly marketed—could spark a debate and thereby change the political calculus for leaders. As a mediator and a world power, one of America's strongest assets is the ability to legitimize ideas and then rally others in support. A central role for the U.S. in this conflict must be to define the zone of negotiability.

This does not mean imposing peace. Rather, it would be a statement of the basic principles the U.S. believes can guide the parties toward a negotiated solution. America has long declared its support for "two states," but must now say more about what that means in practice.

Even if the current talks resume, without American ideas the parties are unlikely to agree on the broad trade-offs necessary to reach a peace deal. A quick deal on "borders and security," as many have proposed, is itself unlikely without Washington addressing the end-game. Otherwise, both sides would be too exposed on issues set for later discussion, like Jerusalem and refugees. Opinion polling has consistently showed that support for peace is strongest when all the core issues are addressed.

An American statement of principles would mobilize regional support. It would provide, for the first time, a public framework for engaging sponsors of the Arab Peace Initiative. It would also strengthen our ability to reassert the importance of a regional support structure for the bilateral negotiations, especially by reviving multilateral contacts and meetings involving Israelis and their neighbors from throughout the region. Moreover, greater regional engagement on the peace process can carry powerful benefits for regional challenges like the Iranian nuclear program.

A clearer U.S. declaration is also the surest way to protect prospects for a two-state solution from an unrelenting onslaught on the ground that pushes the parties away from a peace deal. An American set of ideas would anchor present-day demands on issues like Jerusalem, security and settlements in a clear vision of the future.

Perhaps most urgently, it would broaden the debate from the narrow confines of the settlements question.

At a minimum, the American declaration should be based on the 1967 lines, with agreed territorial swaps; support a compromise on Jerusalem that allows for two capitals for two states; include provisions about security limitations and

guarantees; reiterate America's support for an agreed solution to the refugee problem; and reaffirm our long-standing commitment to the State of Israel. But American principles should also include some caveat, given that our ultimate interest is in an agreed, viable solution—not in any particular formula.

What would it take for American ideas to succeed? Unlike some past efforts, Washington should not try to 'pre-cook' this declaration with one or more parties or to choreograph their reactions. In fact, the U.S. statement of principles would be explicitly described as what our own country believes in and can support; and by implication cannot support. Thus, the U.S. statement would not be designed to achieve immediate approval or adoption by the parties. Its purpose would be to clarify where America stands, how we define our interests and what we can work for. It would aim at influencing the climate of thinking in the region, sobering up those with illusions and encouraging those who need our support.

Timing and context are of course key considerations. Assuming the current gridlock in negotiations persists, some time must elapse until our election results have been digested, here and abroad, and before public attention can be redirected toward the foreboding and increasingly dangerous Arab-Israeli stalemate.

A presidential speech will then be essential to dramatize the seriousness of our purpose and to lay out the principles. It should be immediately followed by a major, high level diplomatic effort to persuade key Middle East leaders and our Quartet and UN allies of our genuine desire to regionalize the peacemaking effort. To maximize support from key members of Congress, the speech should occur before Congress adjourns. No further consultation with the stalemated parties beyond the routine should precede the speech, and leaks of its contents must be kept to an absolute minimum if our purpose is not to be undermined.

The speech could usefully also remove some of the veil of silence that shrouds breakthroughs in past negotiations; for example, progress in the Annapolis process.

As for the substance, in its endorsement of a two-state solution and comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace, the Obama Administration has hinted that a Palestinian settlement should also accompany normalized relations between Israel and the Arab states, putting a broader framing around what has traditionally been defined as a conflict between Israel and its immediate neighbors. The normalization piece of the puzzle should be more fully articulated as part of a new strategy based on presenting American ideas to the parties. It is a way to entice skeptical Israelis, but it also leads back to a long overdue need for Washington to engage on the Arab Peace Initiative.

If the U.S. puts forward its own peace principles, American leadership can ensure that any diplomatic process is defined by as clear a picture as possible of what the parties can expect to gain through a negotiated settlement, and of what they will never gain without one.

Skeptics say it is too risky to present American ideas to the parties, that it would pull the rug out from under current leaders, exposing them to withering domestic criticism. Others argue that it will galvanize obstructionists, not those who support compromise, and could very well precipitate a crisis on the ground. Others simply worry about the cost to American prestige should any of the key players react negatively. But the risks are overstated, and a complete collapse of the process would be far more dangerous, particularly as the strategic environment shifts in favor of regional forces that seek to undermine, rather than promote peace.

America can and must do more than limit itself to managing a conflict that has all too often upended our shared interests in peace and stability.

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