

Hillary Clinton gives Obama's Middle East game away

Chris Marsden
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Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has spent the past days trying to limit the damage from her praise of Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu for making “unprecedented” concessions to the Palestinians by offering to “limit” settlement construction on the West Bank.

Clinton made her remarks after meeting Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas in Abu Dhabi, where he reiterated his refusal to restart talks unless Israel freezes all settlement construction in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

After travelling to Jerusalem to meet Netanyahu, Clinton demanded that the Palestinians resume negotiations and denied that an end to settlement construction had ever been a precondition for talks. “There has never been a precondition. It's always been an issue within the negotiations,” she said.

Netanyahu was delighted, responding that demands for a full Israeli settlement freeze were “being used as a pretext ... as an obstacle that prevents the re-establishment of negotiations.” The Palestinians should “get a grip,” he added.

Clinton's endorsement of Netanyahu's supposed concessions flies in the face of numerous public declarations by President Barack Obama. In doing so, she has provided an unvarnished insight into Washington's real intentions and priorities.

An end to settlement construction was included in the “Road Map” drawn up by the US, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations in 2002 and has remained the formal US position ever since. The Road Map also states that the issue of East Jerusalem, which the Palestinians want as their capital, will be determined in the final phase of negotiations. Netanyahu's offer of a “restraint” on settlement activity excludes East Jerusalem.

Obama came to the White House promising to bring about a negotiated settlement creating a Palestinian state, pledging in this way to rebuild the reputation of the US in the aftermath of the Iraq war. In a major policy speech in Cairo in June, he promised to “personally pursue” the realization of a Palestinian state and stressed that “it is time for these settlements to stop.”

Netanyahu has treated such public pronouncements with contempt, confident that the US relies on Israel as a regional enforcer and that its professions of even-handedness are for public consumption only.

On September 4, he announced a massive program of housing construction involving a total of 3,500 units on the West Bank and in East Jerusalem. Obama made ritual statements of opposition, but by the time he met with Netanyahu and Abbas in New York on September 22, this stance was abandoned. He instead praised Netanyahu for having “discussed important steps to *restrain* settlement activity” [emphasis added] and insisted that both leaders show a “sense of compromise.”

US envoy George Mitchell followed Obama's statement by telling the *Jerusalem Post*, “We are not identifying any issue as being a precondition or an impediment to negotiation.” A settlement freeze was merely one of several US “requests.”

Clinton's speech only echoed the positions previously expressed by Mitchell and indicated by Obama. But she has nevertheless been forced to make a humiliating public retraction.

At a regional forum in Morocco Monday, where she met with various Arab leaders, she said that Netanyahu's offer to limit settlements “falls far short” of a settlement freeze and that “successive American administrations of both parties have opposed Israel's

settlement policy.” Speaking to *Al Jazeera*, she added that Obama had been “absolutely clear” on wanting a “halt to all settlement activity,” and “perhaps those of us who work with him and for him could have been clearer in communicating that that is his policy.”

In Cairo Wednesday, Clinton stated that Washington does not accept the legitimacy of the West Bank settlements and wants to see construction halted “forever.”

Her extraordinary volte face has been necessitated by the anger generated in the Occupied Territories and throughout the Middle East by her fawning before Netanyahu.

Tensions in the Palestinian Authority are already explosive, with Israel’s beginning of various settlement projects accompanied by the demolition of numerous Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem. There has been a series of protests, riots and violent confrontations between Palestinian youth and Israeli police in the compound surrounding the al-Aqsa Mosque.

Under these conditions, Abbas could have been delivered a fatal political blow by Clinton. He is already despised as a Western stooge, particularly after last month, when he initially agreed to a request from Obama not to support a UN report accusing Israel of war crimes in its 22-day assault on Gaza last December and January.

Commenting on Clinton’s remarks, PA Foreign Minister Riad Malki warned, “We should not put the credibility and the legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority again under jeopardy. ... They started accusing my president and the Palestinian leadership of treason [and] of selling the suffering of the Palestinian people in exchange of one item and another.”

Similar concerns were reflected throughout the Middle East. Amre Moussa, secretary-general of the Arab League, said, “I am telling you that all of us, including Saudi Arabia, including Egypt, are deeply disappointed. ... Failure is in the atmosphere.”

Clinton’s back-pedaling is a desperate effort to restore the illusion that the US under Obama will act as an honest broker between Israel and the Palestinians. But this pretense, which is critical to the stability, if not survival, of the venal Arab bourgeois regimes in the region, has been shattered and cannot be restored.

The claim that Obama’s presidency marks a new era for the Middle East has been utilized from the start for

the basest purposes. By posing as a friend of the Palestinians, Obama has attempted to make it easier for the despots in Cairo, Riyadh, Tripoli, et al., to line up behind the US in its ongoing threats against Iran, which are aimed at consolidating US hegemony over the region.

Clinton was in Morocco primarily to engage in discussions with the Arab leaders over supporting US threats against Tehran—hence the need for her public recantation. The *Wall Street Journal* noted that Arab leaders have warned many times that their governments “could be attacked by their publics for conspiring with Israel against another Muslim nation without getting anything in return.”

Even as these sordid discussions are taking place, the US is engaged in joint military maneuvers with Israel, Operation Juniper-Cobra, involving 2,000 personnel and testing sophisticated long-range radar and Patriot anti-missile devices. Commander Carl Meuser of the US Navy destroyer Higgins told the press, “We’re here for some very specific reasons, some specific threats that the Israelis are interested in, that we’re interested in.”

The clear intention is to prepare a possible Israeli strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities, while guarding against any possible reprisal. This is the essential content of US policy in the Middle East. Its exposure will hasten the day when the Arab regimes will indeed be attacked by “their publics.”

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