

PolicyWatch #1670 : Special Forum Report

Three Critical Weeks in the Middle East: Insights into U.S. Policy

Featuring [Robert Satloff](#)

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The following summary is part one of Robert Satloff's presentation to a June 18, 2010, Washington Institute Policy Forum on the impact of the Gaza flotilla incident. Part two, issued as [PolicyWatch #1671](#), addresses the reverberations of the Gaza episode on Arab actors.

For **full audio** of the event, which also included presentations by Michael Eisenstadt, Soner Cagaptay, and David Makovsky, click [here](#).

Rather than look at the Gaza flotilla incident in isolation, it is more useful to view the series of events of the past three weeks as a window into the content and direction of U.S. Middle East policy in the Obama administration.

The NPT Review Conference

It is important to recall that the Gaza incident had the unintended consequence of wiping from the headlines much discussion about the U.S. decision to accede to the final resolution of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) review conference. Indeed, if Gaza had not occurred, there would be much more intense focus on how the decision to acquiesce in a deeply flawed NPT document gave clarity to the administration's priorities.

Only weeks before the NPT conference, numerous administration spokesmen -- including both the vice president and the national security advisor -- had publicly stated that there is "no space between the United States and Israel on security." It is difficult to imagine that any senior administration official will again utter that line after the U.S. decision to accept the NPT document so clearly exposed the space between the two countries on perhaps the most important item on their security agenda: nuclear policy.

Perhaps the "no space" line was exaggerated to begin with; after all, there is often space between any two countries, even two allies, on matters of security. Still, it was abundantly clear that the administration placed a higher value on its goal of maintaining international amity on the NPT and avoiding the sort of messy diplomatic breakdown that occurred on the Bush administration's watch at the 2005 review conference than on protecting Israel's equities and ensuring that the final document focused on actual violators of NPT obligations -- such as Iran, Syria, and North Korea -- rather than on the status of a nonmember. The clean-up effort after this decision was sad to see; it is embarrassing for the United States to say that it "deplores" and "condemns" a document to which it just gave its assent.

Gaza Flotilla Incident

Just hours after the NPT decision came the Gaza incident. On this, there is a set of competing perceptions. The Obama administration argues that it stood by Israel and protected it from UN jackals who wanted to create another "Goldstone moment." In this, the United States rightly points to the high level of intense, personal communication between Washington and Israel on the composition of the latter's inquiry as evidence of the

sound working relationship between the governments.

Yet Washington still has not made a public, ironclad commitment to prevent the UN from creating its own inquiry. And the United States did not stop the Security Council from adopting a condemn-first, ask-questions-later approach on the *Mavi Marmara* incident. Usually, one has to painstakingly piece these diplomatic puzzles together to get a clear picture of the facts involved. In this case, however, a single document puts on full display the utter hypocrisy of the Security Council's operation in this matter: the text of its May 31 presidential statement (as issued by the UN's Department of Public Information; the statement and supporting documents can be found [here](#)).

In paragraph one, the document notes that the Security Council not only expressed "deep regret" at the loss of life aboard the *Mavi Marmara*, but also "condemned those acts which had killed at least ten civilians and wounded many more." Then, in paragraph six, the statement notes that when the assistant secretary-general for political affairs, Oscar Fernandez-Taranco, briefed the council earlier in the day on the events off the Gaza coast, he made clear that the UN had "no independent information on what transpired." In other words, by its own admission, the Security Council said it had no idea what actually happened on the Turkish vessel, but that fact did not stop it from issuing, with U.S. acquiescence, a presidential statement condemning Israel.

Iran Sanctions Resolution and the Folly of Linkage

Ten days after the Gaza episode, the United States scored a diplomatic success by gaining Security Council assent to a new resolution tightening sanctions on Iran for refusing to change course on its nuclear program. Time will tell whether the council's new sanctions and the additional sanctions to be imposed by the United States, European countries, and other "like-minded nations" ultimately impact Iran's strategic calculus.

So far, however, one fact is abundantly clear: once again, the "linkage argument" has been shown to be totally wrong. The sanctions vote was a laboratory experiment -- Israel had just committed an act condemned around the world, and the advocates of linkage normally argue that U.S. diplomatic interests should suffer from America's close connection to Israel. In fact, the Gaza crisis had no impact on the Iran sanctions vote. The "no" votes were "no" votes before the crisis; the "yes" votes were "yes" before the crisis. The Iran debate occurred as though Gaza never happened.

Implications for U.S. Policy

Where does Washington find itself following this flurry of activity since late May?

Without a Turkish ally. Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has made a choice: in his view, Hizballah is a responsible actor in Lebanon; Hamas is a legitimate resistance group; and Iran and Syria are Ankara's strategic partners. The question for the United States is whether and how to exact a price for Erdogan's brazen decision to spit in its face by leading the opposition to the Iran sanctions effort.

Some will say now is the moment for critics of Erdogan to push for passage of the Armenian genocide resolution in Congress. Without offering a view on specific legislation, however, Congress should think twice about using this as a tool to punish Erdogan. After all, the last thing the United States should want to do is give this Islamist leader -- a man who welcomed Sudanese president Omar Hassan al-Bashir by saying that it is inconceivable for a Muslim to commit genocide, a man who has succeeded in bringing anti-Semitism from the fringe of Turkish politics into the mainstream -- an excuse to wrap himself in a nationalist flag.

But any sense of proportionality and strategic interest dictates that Washington needs to exact a price from Erdogan. Indeed, if the United States punished the Israeli government because of the embarrassment caused when some mid-level bureaucrat issued a Jerusalem zoning decision in the middle of Vice President Biden's visit, one can only hope that U.S. officials are working overtime to consider ways to erode the standing of the Turkish prime minister and his ruling party and strengthen the majority of Turks who still share our common

values. The goal, of course, is not petty vengeance but rather strengthening the parties inside Turkey -- and the majority of Turkish voters -- who reject the ruling party's Islamist shift of Turkish politics and Turkish foreign policy.

On the precipice of another U.S.-Israeli crisis. The next potential crisis would make the events of March seem like a mild squabble. Two deadlines loom in September: the expiration of the indirect "proximity" talks and the expiration of Israel's moratorium on new construction in West Bank settlements. Of course, a decision by Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas to move from indirect to direct talks would almost surely give Israeli leaders the excuse to extend the moratorium, but the events of recent weeks make that less, not more, likely. Indeed, as a result of the Gaza incident, Abbas will be spending much of his time fending off efforts by Turks and others to reconcile Hamas and Fatah, on terms that will torpedo any prospect for Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy.

Are Washington and Jerusalem prepared to reach mutually acceptable understandings on settlement construction -- some variation of the Sharon-Bush formula, perhaps -- in the event that the most Abbas can do is prevent a terrible reconciliation deal with Hamas? At the moment, it is not clear that Washington and Jerusalem even want to reach such understandings.

Without much time on Iran. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recently stated that Iran could have a nuclear bomb in as little as one year. This is a sobering comment, despite all the talk about how technological difficulties have slowed Iran's nuclear program. The Pentagon and U.S. intelligence more generally have always erred on the long side of such estimates, not the short side. If Gates says it is possible within a year -- he actually said one to three years -- it is a serious matter. That means (a) the UN Security Council has probably approved its last round of Iran economic sanctions, given the record of how long it takes to get a resolution through the council's machinery; (b) the time available for the new sanctions to compel a change in Iran's behavior is very limited; and (c) if the president is going to fulfill his commitment to prevent Iran from achieving a nuclear weapons capability, the clock is ticking very fast.

In this regard, the administration's NPT posture only makes sense if it is part of a strategy to build up international goodwill in advance of tough punitive, and perhaps military, measures to deal with an egregious NPT violator. But if it becomes apparent that Obama's administration is not willing to use all aspects of national power to fulfill this commitment -- perhaps the most categorical foreign policy commitment of his presidency -- then it is almost certain that Israel will take measures on its own. So, if the past year has seen some fireworks on the U.S.-Israeli front, the next year is likely to be even more combustible.

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