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From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
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POLITICO
W.H. seeks new ideas about Mideast peace
By Laura Rozen
January 13, 2011

With U.S. Middle East peace efforts at an impasse, the Obama administration has sought new ideas from outside experts on how to advance the peace process.

One task force, convened by Sandy Berger and Stephen Hadley, former national security advisers to Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush, respectively, is due to report its recommendations to the National Security Council later this month, American Middle East specialists informed of the task force's work told POLITICO.

A second effort, led by Martin Indyk, vice president of Foreign Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution, held meetings this week with senior NSC Middle East/Iran adviser Dennis Ross, Palestinian negotiator Saab Erekat and Israel's ambassador to the U.S., Michael Oren, among others.

The solicitation of ideas comes as the administration's peace efforts are "utterly stuck," as one outside adviser who consults the administration on the issue told POLITICO Wednesday on condition of anonymity.

"There's no pretense of progress. With the State of the Union coming up and the new GOP Congress, they are taking a few weeks [to regroup and solicit] ideas to push forward and ... to give a real jump-start to what would be meaningful negotiations," the adviser said.

Ross traveled quietly to Israel last week to seek more clarity from Israeli leaders on their security requirements and ideas for advancing the peace process.

But the Middle East adviser described both the Israeli and Palestinian parties as unforthcoming on specifics, including on the two key issues — borders and security — that several veteran U.S. diplomats have advocated take priority.

"The U.S. is asking for the parties to provide substantive answers on borders and security, but they don't see it happening," the adviser said.

"There are three options that this administration can adopt," former U.S. ambassador to Israel Daniel Kurtzer

told POLITICO Thursday. "It can elicit an Israeli initiative. It can elicit a Palestinian initiative. Or it can develop its own initiative."

"It's had no success with the first two, and it hasn't tried the third," Kurtzer said. "So if it wants to try to develop an initiative, it's got to come up with a substantive program that says to the parties, 'When you get to negotiations, here are your terms of reference.' ... And they have to be relatively narrow terms of reference, so we don't start from where we were 15 years ago."

Though the Israeli government has resisted suggestions that the U.S. administration should present "an American plan," Kurtzer argued that the U.S. experience to date has proven "there is no other option."

Meanwhile, former Middle East Quartet deputy envoy Robert Danin proposed in the Financial Times this week that the U.S. focus its efforts on stepping up support for the Palestinian state-building efforts of Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, an initiative that has wide support in both the U.S. and Israeli administrations.

But the Washington Middle East adviser said there's a risk in supporting such a "bottom-up" approach without pursuing a corresponding top-down process that meaningfully advances Palestinian sovereignty.

Without a process that will achieve Palestinian statehood, Fayyad and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas "are vulnerable to being seen as policemen of the Israeli occupation," he said. Support for Palestinian institution-building, he said, "is like apple-pie and motherhood — everybody is all for it — it can't be the only thing out there."

Another possibility is that the U.S. could step back from the process — either de facto or in a more deliberate manner.

"The more it looks like there is nothing happening, the more pressure accumulates on the [Israeli] Labor Party and [Israeli Defense Minister Ehud] Barak to quit the government," Daniel Levy, co-director of the Middle East Task Force at the New American Foundation, said. "The U.S. may have been convinced that it's very difficult to do the big heavy lifting to change the dynamics [right now]. ... If the process goes on at a very low flame, one almost lets Israeli politics take its own course and see what happens if Bibi feels pressured by so much inactivity."

The risk to that approach, Kurtzer said, is what fills the vacuum left in the absence of the peace process.

"There's no such thing as a vacuum in the Middle East. You're either moving forward, or retreating," Kurtzer said. "And when you have the Middle East in bad shape anyway — the Lebanon stuff is an indication it is getting worse — once there's an admitted vacuum in the peace process, the Middle East gets worse. And the bad guys will take advantage."

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