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The Obama Parameters

Getting Israel and Palestine to a Two-State Solution

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“This is not something I was able to get done,” U.S. President [Barack Obama said](#) [1] of the [Israeli-Palestinian peace process](#) [2]. “I am not that hopeful that it’s going to happen in the next nine months,” he continued, after which he reiterated his belief that “a [two-state solution](#) [3] is the best way.” Obama also cautioned that the United States can’t pursue a two-state solution on behalf of [Israel](#) [4] and [Palestine](#) [5] but that both states must forge this path for themselves.

Washington, however, should not remove itself from the [Israeli-Palestinian peace process](#) [6] entirely. In fact, there are a number of steps Washington should take to help make the [two-state solution](#) [7] a reality. Most notably, Obama should leave both sides with one parting gift: a blueprint for what a two-state solution should look like, which will open various tracks for future progress for the parties and for the international community.

SETTING THE PARAMETERS

If the White House wants to make one last attempt at forging peace, it could lay out a series of guidelines for Obama’s successor well before he leaves office on January 20. The effort, which we will call the “[Obama Parameters](#) [8],” would propose a permanent [two-state agreement](#) [9] that should become a UN Security Council resolution. It would replace [Resolution 242](#) [10] from 1967 and other recently mentioned initiatives for a UN Security Council resolution.

Obama has a strong foundation to build on. The [Obama Parameters](#) [11] could be based on blueprints from past negotiations between Palestinian President [Mahmoud](#)

[Abbas](#) [12] and Israeli Prime Minister [Ehud Olmert](#) [13] in 2008 as well as the negotiations brokered by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in 2013–14. Obama could also draw on U.S. presidential statements from Bill Clinton in 2000 and George W. Bush in 2004–5, as well as his own statements from 2011. All present a clear vision of two states, and all are consistent with the “[two states for two peoples](#) [14]” principle, which aims to resolve the four core contentious issues: territory, Jerusalem, refugees, and security.

Aside from creating a viable blueprint for moving forward, the [Obama Parameters](#) [15] could also prove to the world that the United States must stay involved in forging a [two-state solution](#) [16], even if skeptics claim that the [Israeli government](#) [17] has no will to move forward and that Palestinian leadership cannot get its people to support progress. As Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Abbas [blame each other](#) [18] for derailing the process, Washington’s release of a blueprint for the future presidents would encourage them to act.

Even if the [Obama Parameters](#) [19] fail to bring Abbas and Netanyahu back to the negotiating table, the effort would show that the international community is not content to sit on the sidelines. The international community can take this opportunity to clearly articulate the destination of the process and encourage the parties and all stakeholders to move in its direction. Doing so would also make a strong impression on the Israeli and Palestinian publics, presenting them with a clear discussion of the core issues at stake, even if their leaders refuse to engage in it. The Obama Parameters could prompt honest discourse about the realistic—if not painful—concessions both sides will need to make. Even better, the dialogue could prompt Netanyahu and Abbas to reconsider the value of negotiations and might lead to broader political change on both sides.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

When it comes to the [Israeli-Palestinian peace process](#) [20], location is everything. By bringing a resolution to the UN Security Council, the United States would shape which states become stakeholders in creating a successful two-state solution. The Arab states would become empowered to work toward a brokered peace (such as the Arab League’s adoption of the Arab Peace Initiative), Europe would have a central role in the fate of the project, and both Russia and the United States could cement their roles in helping both sides reach an agreement.

Most important, setting the goal of a [two-state solution](#) [21] would push Israel and Palestine to take constructive steps that promote their own interests, while also making both countries move closer to a reality of two nation-states and eventually to the shared outcome. The Obama Parameters would almost certainly codify the 1967 borders and would allow Israel to keep large settlement blocs within Palestinian territory. The resolution would allow large Jewish neighborhoods to remain in East Jerusalem as well. Israel would therefore be able to continue construction in these neighborhoods, because building there would not contravene the parameters of the permanent agreement. Similarly, subject to compliance with the parameters, Palestine would be able to reapproach the UN about acceptance as a full member state without the threat of veto by the United States.

The prospective Obama Parameters could help dissuade Israel and Palestine from taking destructive steps, steering both parties away from their tendencies to sabotage the peace process both on the ground and in the international arena. Israel would be dissuaded from building outside of settlement blocs, and Palestine would be less inclined to take its case to the International Criminal Court—a step that would clearly take us further away from a reality of two states living peacefully side by side and therefore trigger an equation of incentives versus sanctions.

Although the Obama administration has failed to make substantial progress on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, it could still make inroads that the next president could use to his or her advantage. At a minimum, the effort could form the basis of a renewed approach to negotiations. The future of Israel as the democratic state of the Jewish people hinges on the ability of Washington to act, rather than demur. Obama may be at the end of his term, but he's not out of options.

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- [8] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/08/06/how-obama-plans-to-create-a-virtual-palestinian-state/>
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- [10] <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpi/palestine/ch3.pdf>
- [11] <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/An-opportunity-for-the-Obama-parameters-449791>
- [12] <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/01/mahmoud-abbas-time-running-160107100226164.html>
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- [14] <http://scholar.harvard.edu/hckelman/publications/israel-and-palestine-two-states-two-peoples-if-not-now-when-policy-statement-b>
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- [19] <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/11/netanyahu-obama-meeting-compensation-package-disengagement.html>
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