



Israel's Bold Steps

Since being sworn in as prime minister in March 2009, Benjamin Netanyahu has broadcast his commitment to solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He said he supports the creation of a demilitarized Palestinian state alongside Israel—an idea that Netanyahu, a lifetime Likudnik, had never publicly endorsed until his June 14 speech. The Palestinian Authority (PA) was unmoved by Netanyahu's change of heart.

Nonetheless, in November, Netanyahu went a step further, declaring a 10-month moratorium on all Israeli construction in the West Bank—a concession that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called “unprecedented” in advance of negotiations. The PA was unmoved by that gesture, too, because the moratorium did not include neighborhoods in eastern Jerusalem such as Gilo, Har Homa, the Jewish Quarter of the Old City and student housing near Hebrew University.

While Israel carries out the moratorium, she is also taking steps to improve life for Palestinians in the West Bank. In the past several months, Israel has dismantled 185 roadblocks and checkpoints, enabling greater freedom of movement between Palestinian cities. Such openness was unheard of during the height of the Palestinian campaign of terrorist attacks that began in 2000. Israeli Arabs now routinely shop in the West Bank, boosting the economy there by about seven percent last year.

However, while Israel has taken these bold steps, the PA has done nothing to indicate its desire for peace with Israel. In fact, PA President Mahmoud Abbas told The Washington Post's Jackson Diehl last May that he expected the United States to pressure Israel while he sat and waited. “I will wait for Israel to freeze settlements,” Abbas explained. “Until then, in the West Bank we have a good reality . . . the people are living a normal life.”

In the same interview with Diehl, Abbas revealed how far-reaching then-Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's offer was in late 2008. Abbas said that Olmert showed him a map proposing a Palestinian state on 97 percent of the West Bank. Abbas also confirmed that Olmert “accepted the principle” of the “right of return” of Palestinian refugees—something no previous Israeli prime minister had done—and offered to resettle thousands in Israel. But Abbas did not accept Olmert's offer. Why? “The gaps were wide,” Abbas said.

Abbas was not lying. The gaps between Israel and the PA remain wide because the PA maintains a maximalist position that is irreconcilable with Israel's most far-reaching proposals.

Yet, Israel continues to seek peace. As evidenced by Ehud Barak's offer to Yasser Arafat in 2000, Ariel Sharon's painful withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, Ehud Olmert's offer to Mahmoud Abbas in 2008 and Benjamin Netanyahu's bold steps in 2009, Israel is committed to peacefully ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict once and for all.