

As Rockets Fly, Administration Blasts Israel

Jonathan S. Tobin, Commentary Magazine, 9 July, 2014

Give the Obama administration credit. Its Middle East policies may be counterproductive, but the White House is consistent. Rather than let the fact that hundreds of terrorist rockets were launched at Israeli cities affect their public pronouncements, the administration went ahead and let a White House official blast the Jewish state and its government yesterday.

Philip Gordon, the White House coordinator for the Middle East and a special assistant to President Barack Obama, gave the keynote address at the Haaretz Conference on Peace in Tel Aviv yesterday. Yet rather than use the opportunity to focus on American support for Israel's right to self-defense at a time when the very city he was speaking in was being targeted by Hamas rockets, Gordon centered his remarks on harsh criticism of the Israeli government and lavished praise on the Palestinian leader who had embraced unity with the people currently shooting at Tel Aviv and scores of other Israeli cities, towns, and villages.

Gordon's thesis was familiar. The Obama administration believes that Israel must negotiate a two-state solution with the Palestinian Authority because it cannot remain a Jewish and democratic state while continuing to rule over millions of Arabs in the West Bank. And he blames Israel for the failure to conclude such an agreement with PA leader Mahmoud Abbas.

That's the position Secretary of State John Kerry adopted after the predictable collapse of his peace initiative in April and echoed by various administration officials since then. The U.S. preferred to blame Israel for this failure rather than recognize that Abbas was never truly interested in signing any agreement. Faith in Abbas's commitment to negotiations was lost when he fled the talks to return to efforts to get the United Nations to recognize Palestinian independence. Any remaining trust in his bona fides should have evaporated when he concluded a unity pact with the Islamist terrorists of Hamas rather than agreeing to continue to talk to Israel. The administration compounded that error when it decided to continue to keep sending aid to the PA despite the presence of Hamas in its ranks, which U.S. law forbade.

But as egregious as those misjudgments were before this latest outbreak of violence, they were rendered even more absurd by the spectacle of an American official sticking to this line even as a Hamas rocket offensive rained down on the Jewish state.

Perhaps the president believes that timing is irrelevant when it comes to pressuring the Netanyahu government but if the U.S. goal is to persuade the Israeli people to make more concessions to the Palestinians, then yesterday's speech was a disaster.

It bears repeating that Israel made three offers of statehood and independence to the Palestinians in 2000, 2001, and 2008 that would have given them control of Gaza, almost all of the West Bank, and a share of Jerusalem. The Palestinians, first under Yasir Arafat and then Abbas, turned them down each time. Abbas's recent decision to flee the latest talks and his refusal to recognize the legitimacy of a Jewish state no matter where its borders would be drawn constitute a fourth "no" to peace. This is a fact that has caused most Israelis to give up on the process even though the overwhelming majority—including the supposedly intransigent Netanyahu—favor a two-state solution in theory and would be willing to make serious territorial concessions in exchange for an end to the conflict, as opposed to a truce.

But the rocket fire from Gaza provided more than an inconvenient background noise for Gordon's speech. It was a reminder of what happens when Israel gives up territory to the Palestinians. Ariel Sharon heeded the international calls for Israel to make concessions and to separate from the Palestinians and in 2005 he withdrew every Israeli settlement, soldier, and civilian from Gaza. But rather than use this as a steppingstone to comprehensive peace, the Palestinians used the retreat to turn Gaza into a giant missile-launching pad and terrorist base. Since Hamas's 2007 coup when they seized control of the strip, Gaza has been an independent Palestinian state in all but name.

As such, it is a standing argument against further such withdrawals in the West Bank that abuts Israel's main population centers. No Israeli government will ever contemplate ceding security control of more territory unless it can be sure that it will not be used to replicate the Gaza experiment.

But instead of sending a strong message to the Palestinians that they must renounce violence and make peace, Gordon's speech made clear that the U.S. has no intention of holding Abbas accountable for his embrace of Hamas.

Gordon's pointed dismissal of Netanyahu's recent comments about the need for Israel to secure the Jordan River security line in light of the growing Islamist threat from the East in Iraq as well as Syria will also inspire no Israeli confidence in the judgment or the reliability of American promises.

As I wrote yesterday, the Obama administration bears a not inconsiderable degree of responsibility for the current mess. Kerry's initiative was undertaken with complete disregard of the consequences of its likely failure. The secretary's prediction of a third intifada in the wake of its collapse was a self-fulfilling prophecy that Israelis are now witnessing as they mourn the three teenagers who were murdered by Hamas terrorists and see their skies filled with rockets. The decision to treat the Fatah-Hamas pact as not being a threat to peace was similarly misguided. The idea that a weakling like Abbas could force Hamas to embrace peace wasn't so much a mistake as a demonstration of the administration's complete lack of understanding of the situation.

When a sea change in the political culture of the Palestinians happens that will allow their leaders to recognize Israel's legitimacy and end the conflict, they will find their neighbours willing to talk and to once again offer them sovereignty over part of the land they share with the Jews. But if Obama, Kerry, or Gordon think Israelis are likely to embrace Abbas or to start more withdrawals on the West Bank at a time when the Palestinians are using the only territory they control to wage war on them, they're as arrogant as they are clueless.