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To: Jon Davidson

Subject: Fw: and in case you haven't seen, Ignatius column today in Wash Post. Sid

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From: sbwhoeop

To: H

Sent: Sun Mar 21 15:50:11 2010

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 Time to break the fog of Middle East politics

By David Ignatius
 Sunday, March 21, 2010; A19

Diplomats love ambiguity. It allows them to fuzz up the hard parts of a negotiation -- the "final status" issues, as they're often called -- and so on. This devotion to "constructive ambiguity" has been a hallmark of U.S. peacemaking on the Palestinian-Israeli issue for 40 years. Rather than say that Palestinians must give up the "right of return" to Israel -- successive U.S. administrations have tried to defer these unmentionables until later. But the fog machine blew apart this month, when the Israeli Interior Ministry announced during a visit by Vice President Biden that Israel would move its capital to Jerusalem. The administration was upset, to put it mildly: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called the housing announcement a "deeply negative signal" about the move. In the ensuing hubbub over the "crisis" in U.S.-Israeli relations, there have been frantic attempts to pretend it was all a misunderstanding and that the move was an accident. But the administration's public statement of the Israeli right's rejection of concessions on Jerusalem. Prime Minister Netanyahu, which controls the Interior Ministry, basically called his bluff.

"Freezing building in East Jerusalem is one of those things we cannot do," said Dore Gold, a right-wing former Israeli ambassador to the United Nations, in Queens?"

So what should the administration do, now that the Israeli right has put Jerusalem squarely on the table despite the best efforts of the ambiguity machine? The administration's best strategy is to do what it considered a year ago, which is to state clearly the basic principles that must frame these negotiations: a return to the 1967 borders, with mutual adjustments to allow for big Israeli settlement blocks; and a demilitarized Palestinian state. The Obama administration debated whether to issue such a statement of principles a year ago, when it began its peacemaking effort. Launching the effort, Clinton argued that based on his experience in the Northern Ireland peace talks, it was better to let the parties haggle before the United States stepped in. Rather than stating U.S. negotiating principles at the outset, the Obama team decided instead to push Netanyahu on settlements. The administration hoped Netanyahu would cave. The Israeli leader coolly bided his time, dickering about procedural issues while Obama got weaker politically by the month.

In retrospect, it seems clear that the step-by-step approach was a mistake: Constructive ambiguity, in this case, proved destructive. It allowed Netanyahu to continue his straddle.

Jerusalem is the hardest issue of all in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiation, and for that reason, would-be peacemakers have wanted to save it for last. What's needed now is for Obama to announce that when negotiations begin, the United States will state its views about Jerusalem and other key issues. davidignatius@washpost.com

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To: Jon Davidson

Date: Sun, 21 Mar 2010 15:51:29 -0400

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