

## **One Last Chance for a Palestinian State**

In the waning months of our time in Washington, we tried one last time to secure a two-state solution. The Olmert proposal haunted the President and me. In September the prime minister had given Abbas a map outlining the territory of a Palestinian state. Israel would annex 6.3 percent of the West Bank. (Olmert gave Abbas cause to believe that he was willing to reduce that number to 5.8 percent.) All of the other elements were still on the table, including the division of Jerusalem. Olmert had insisted that Abbas sign then and there. When the Palestinian had demurred, wanting to consult his experts before signing, Olmert refused to give him the map. The Israeli leader told me that he and Abbas had agreed to convene their experts the next day. Apparently that meeting never took place. But I knew what had been proposed, and I asked Jonathan Schwartz, a State Department lawyer with many years of experience in the issue, to construct an approximation of the territorial compromise. I wanted to preserve the Olmert offer. I talked to the President and asked whether he would be willing to receive Olmert and Abbas one last time. What if I could get the two of them to come and accept the parameters of the proposal? We knew it was a long shot. Olmert had announced in the summer that he would step down as prime minister. Israel would hold elections in the first part of the next year. He was a lame duck, and so was the President. Still, I worried that there might never be another chance like this one. Tzipi Livni urged me (and, I believe, Abbas) not to enshrine the Olmert proposal. "He has no standing in Israel," she said. That was probably true, but to have an Israeli prime minister on record offering those remarkable elements and a Palestinian president accepting them would have pushed the peace process to a new level. Abbas refused. We had one last chance. The two leaders came separately in November and December to say good-bye. The President took Abbas into the Oval Office alone and appealed to him to reconsider. The Palestinian stood firm, and the idea died. Now, as I write in 2011, the process seems to have gone backward. The Palestinians are speaking in the UN General Assembly of unilaterally declaring statehood. There are familiar squabbles about Israeli settlement activity. I certainly know the frustration of Israeli announcements of building new housing on disputed land; it often felt as though those bulletins were issued just after the secretary of state had traveled there. It happened to me several times. Not only would I call Olmert and Livni to

complain, but I would also publicly denounce what Israel had done, reminding everyone that the United States would not recognize unilateral alterations of the status quo at the time of negotiation. But I never let progress on the settlement issue become a U.S. precondition for negotiations. I believed that once there was an agreement, the question of settlements would be moot. In the end, the Palestinians walked away from the negotiations—and soon a new Israeli prime minister would walk away too. Abbas was told by numerous Israelis, including some of Olmert's closest advisors, that the lame-duck prime minister did not have the legitimacy to deliver the deal. But had he expressed a willingness to accept the extraordinary terms he'd been offered, it might have been a turning point in the long history of the intractable conflict. It might be a long time before another Israeli prime minister offered anything as dramatic again. I turned over the negotiating file to my successor. The conditions were almost ripe for a deal on our watch, but not quite. Still, I have to believe that sooner or later, there will be a two-state solution. There is no peaceful alternative.