

The Scouting Report: Re-engaging the Middle East Peace Process

President Obama recently met with Benjamin Netanyahu, prime minister of Israel, and will meet with Mahmoud Abbas on May 28. These sessions are aimed at re-invigorating the Middle East peace process and addressing the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict. This occurs as Obama prepares to address the broader Muslim world from Egypt on June 4.

To examine the issues and preview President Obama's upcoming trip, Brookings expert Tamara Cofman Wittes and Senior *Politico* Editor Fred Barbash took questions in the May 27, 2009 edition of the Scouting Report. The transcript of this chat follows.

12:29 Fred Barbash - Moderator: Welcome all. Thanks for joining us. Our guest today is Tamara Wittes and our topic is the Middle East and the prospects for a re-energized peace process.

Tamara is an expert on Middle East affairs, who focuses on U.S. efforts to promote democracy and the Arab-Israeli peace process. She has directed several Middle East research projects, including the Middle East Democracy and Development Project at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy.

Welcome Tamara.

12:30 [Comment From Laurie] President Obama has chosen Egypt as the venue for his address to the Muslim world. Can you explain the significance of this choice?

12:32 Tamara Cofman Wittes: Thanks to all of you for joining me!

Laurie, Egypt is a momentous choice, because it embodies many of the challenges facing Muslim societies, and many of the dilemmas facing US policy. It's a strong government, a strong ally of the US but the broader population doesn't support US policy and doesn't like the alliance. The government there is autocratic and rather repressive of independent political movements. There is growing religiosity in society, and a concern among those in power that Islamist politicians will try to overturn the existing order. All these themes are things Obama will have to address, because they are all so glaringly obvious in Cairo, they can't be ignored.

12:32 [Comment From Rolinda] During the short time Obama has been in office, have you seen any change in the attitudes of people in the Middle East and in Arab countries around the globe toward the U.S.?

12:33 Tamara Cofman Wittes: Thanks, Rolinda. My colleague Shibley Telhami, who does regular polling in six Arab countries, just released his latest poll (taken last month). You can find the results on the Brookings website.

12:34 Tamara Cofman Wittes: Shibley's polling shows that the Arab public has a very positive impression of Obama himself, but still quite negative feelings about the United States and its policies. So there is clearly a willingness to listen, an eagerness to hear some change from the president in his Cairo speech.

12:35 Tamara Cofman Wittes: But there is also a lot of frustration, so the window of opportunity for Obama to change minds may be narrow. The Middle East peace process will be an important test case for this change in public attitudes.

12:35 Tamara Cofman Wittes: here's the link to Shibley's slides showing the poll data:
http://www.brookings.edu/events/2009/~//media/Files/events/2009/0519_arab_opinion/2009_arab_public_opinion_poll.pdf

12:36 [Comment From rebecca] What came of Obama's meeting with Netanyahu?

12:38 Tamara Cofman Wittes: Actually, not much. Both sides were getting to know one another and doing a bit of testing: how serious is the other guy about the stuff he's been saying? Obama made clear his commitment to a two-state solution to the conflict, and his strong interest in seeing Israeli action on settlements. Netanyahu made clear his view that the Arab side should make the first move in rebuilding confidence in the peace process, and emphasized his concern over Iran and its threat to the region. They agreed to, essentially, keep talking about these issues. The weeks to come may see either some common ground achieved (say on Arab and Israeli steps in the peace process), or increased confrontation (say, over Israeli settlement activity).

12:38 [Comment From Ron] What does Obama hope to achieve in his upcoming meeting with Mahmoud Abbas?

12:39 Tamara Cofman Wittes: As these questions suggest, Obama's having a series of meetings with regional leaders on the peace process, which will continue even after his meeting with Abbas -- in fact, the White House announced that Obama will stop in Riyadh on his way to Cairo, presumably to talk over the peace process with Saudi King Abdullah.

12:40 Tamara Cofman Wittes: President Abbas has much more to gain from his meeting with Obama today than Obama can expect from Abbas -- Abbas is the weak leader of a divided Palestinian polity, ruling only over part of his intended territory and beset by political infighting within his own party. His term is officially expired, so he doesn't even have much democratic legitimacy remaining.

12:41 Tamara Cofman Wittes: All Abbas has to hold on to, to justify his continued leadership, is the idea of a Middle East Peace Process that can, at long last, deliver a Palestinian state. So he is seeking to ally himself with President Obama's strong words and assertive action on behalf of a new peace process, in order to buy himself some time and space back home.

12:42 [Comment From Guest] Is it possible for Obama to pressure Israel into the two state solution and if so how? Also how far would this go to normalizing Arab – U.S. relationships?

12:43 Tamara Cofman Wittes: In principle, I suppose an American president could trade on the importance of the US-Israeli relationship, in particular when Israel is facing a major threat from Iran, in order to "pressure" Israel into a two-state solution. But such an imposed solution would not be likely to last, at least not without a lot of foreign (maybe American) boots on the ground to enforce it. In order to be viable and sustainable, a peace agreement must meet the minimum needs of both sides, and achieve the support of their publics.

12:44 Tamara Cofman Wittes: Right now, in fact, polls shows that majorities of both Israelis and Palestinians support a two-state solution, but they are skeptical of negotiations under current conditions. So Obama has to somehow break through that skepticism, provide some tangible reason for Israelis and Palestinians to hope again that peace can work. Then THEY will pressure their leaders for peace.

12:45 [Comment From Hanan Solayman] How do you foresee US policy towards Syria?

12:46 Tamara Cofman Wittes: Syria is going to be an important bellwether in judging the success or failure of Obama's "engagement" strategy in the Middle East. If Syria is enticed by engagement to corral Hamas and Hizballah toward a more moderate stance toward Israel, to loosen its alliance with Iran, to cooperate with the US in stabilizing Iraq and to open direct peace talks with Israel that will be a huge gain for the United States and its goals in the region. If Syria prefers its alliance with the region's radical forces of resistance that will be a blow to what the president is trying to do.

12:47 [Comment From Adrianna] What should Obama say to the Muslim world in his upcoming address?

12:49 Tamara Cofman Wittes: Given what I wrote above, I'm sure glad I don't have to draft this speech! There are many audiences to balance and many pitfalls. But I think, at a minimum, the president must clearly state his view that Muslim communities are part of the global community, not some kind of "other" to be dealt with as a special problem. I think he should talk about the history and values that we share, including the values of liberty, human rights, and equal treatment under the law.

12:50 Tamara Cofman Wittes: I think he would do best to speak mainly to citizens and publics, not to governments -- and to address the aspirations of the Muslim world's overwhelmingly young population for freedom, opportunity, and their own chance to change the world for the better.

12:50 [Comment From Jason] Should the US or Europe offer incentives for democratic reform?

12:51 Tamara Cofman Wittes: They should, and they do -- but they should do more. And they should develop a set of common principles in approaching this issue that they both emphasize in all their diplomacy with autocratic states -- particularly that local citizens' groups have the right, under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to request and receive external support for their work.

12:52 [Comment From Hanan Solayman] Was Obama's choice of Egypt a good choice to address the Muslim world? Would you prefer the speech to be at Azhar Mosque for its significance instead of Cairo University?

12:53 Tamara Cofman Wittes: Azhar Mosque is of course a central location in the history and current nature of Islamic education and Islamic law. But it is not universally regarded as the central

authority -- Islam is diverse and has no "pope" or other chief arbiter. So choosing Azhar would be a double-edged sword.

12:54 Tamara Cofman Wittes: On the other hand, Cairo University is a symbol of youth, of education, of the future. So it helps the president to highlight what I suspect will be some of his main themes. Judging from his speech in Ankara, he wants to present a positive, forward-looking agenda for the US in the Muslim world.

12:54 [Comment From Bruce Blevins] Is there agreement among Arab nations as to what an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement should be? Do they have a desire to participate?

12:55 Tamara Cofman Wittes: Good question -- we don't know the full answer yet! But the whole Arab League endorsed the Arab Peace Initiative, so that is sort of a minimum vision from the Arab states regarding what peace should look like and what they are ready to do.

12:56 Tamara Cofman Wittes: In order for President Obama's strategy to succeed, he needs Arab states, as individuals or jointly, to take steps to reach out to Israel and begin to give the Israeli public a sense of what is possible for them in the region once they make a deal with the Palestinians (and Syrians and Lebanese). This will motivate the Israeli government (even this Israeli government) to reciprocate by taking steps demonstrating its willingness to pursue a peace agreement. It will be a slow and painstaking process, but if none of the Arab states are willing to step up, it will not work.

12:57 [Comment From Gary] How much of an obstacle to peace is Iran's current nuclear ambitions, and what tactics do you expect Obama to pursue after the upcoming elections?

12:59 Tamara Cofman Wittes: The obstacles Iran poses to the peace process are not limited to its nuclear program. Iran is the main sponsor of Hamas and Hizballah, two spoilers committed to preventing a negotiated compromise between Israel and the PLO. These three actors are also working rhetorically throughout the region's mass media to create cynicism and despair regarding the possibility of peace, ginning up public support for violence and public disgruntlement with Arab governments that support the peace process. This is a dangerous and inflammatory situation for the whole region.

1:00 Tamara Cofman Wittes: What tactics will Obama use? Already the US has signaled its willingness to join the P-5 talks with Iran over its nuclear program. Other steps might include direct dialogue regarding common concerns such as Iraqi stabilization and fighting al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

1:00 Tamara Cofman Wittes: Of course, it takes two to tango, and we don't yet know the Iranian government's interest in these sorts of dialogues.

1:00 [Comment From Kevin MN] How poorly do you think it hurts America's image in the region that we support several very regressive, undemocratic regimes (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, etc) but won't respect a nation with a democratically elected government (Iran)? Iran is the most democratic country in the region, since the next closest competitor won't allow almost half of its residents citizenship.

1:02 Tamara Cofman Wittes: I would not describe Iran as a democracy, just because they have an elected president and parliament. Democracy is far more than elections -- after all, Egypt also

has an elected president and parliament. Iran's domestic repression of basic political and social freedoms is at least as bad as the governments you cite, and as recent cases reveal clearly, it lacks anything resembling due process or equal protection under law.

1:03 Tamara Cofman Wittes: That said, yes, I think it does hurt America's image in the region that the US is seen to support autocratic governments because they are in harmony with our foreign policy interests. It is a double standard that frustrates democracy activists across the region. I think it is possible to cooperate with these governments on common strategic goals, like Middle East peacemaking, while speaking out publicly and privately regarding their repression. I hope the President will do so.

1:04 [Comment From Alex] How has George Mitchell fit into the Obama administration's approach to the Middle East and what role can we expect him to play in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process?

1:05 Tamara Cofman Wittes: Mitchell has been absolutely central to the administration's efforts so far on the peace process. He has travelled to the region several times, meeting with leaders from Morocco to the Gulf to brief them on US policy efforts and to solicit their concrete support. He is also a doggedly determined and very experienced negotiator himself, and when the two central parties get back to the table I expect he'll play a very active role.

1:05 [Comment From Dale Dean] The Palestinian side is divided between Hamas and Fatah, which would cripples progress toward peace. Does the U.S. have a role in promoting Fatah-Hamas reconciliation and, later, in engaging Hamas in the peace process through a Palestinian national unity government?

1:07 Tamara Cofman Wittes: One of the early questions the administration faced was whether to support the Palestinian unity talks being sponsored by Egypt. Secretary Clinton made some very carefully worded statements suggesting that a certain type of unity government would be acceptable to the United States -- and she has asked Congress to free up money for a unity government that meets her criteria. So I think they have moved a bit from where President Bush was on this issue.

1:08 Tamara Cofman Wittes: Right now the obstacles to Palestinian unity are on the ground, not so much in Washington. Neither side is willing to make important and necessary concessions to allow cooperation that would improve the lives of Palestinians and prepare the ground for new elections. Both are seeking mainly to preserve what they have (miserable though it may be) rather than to go for something better.

1:08 [Comment From Steve] Do you think it is realistic that the Arab states will agree to make any gestures towards Israel without substantial movement on the settlements question? Is there any reason to think Netanyahu can make a move that will satisfy the Arab states given the constraints of his coalition?

1:10 Tamara Cofman Wittes: The Arab states (and President Obama!) have made clear to Israel that they expect serious action on settlements, in particular a freeze called for under the Road Map -- a total freeze, including natural growth. I expect that President Obama will hear that again from King Abdullah and President Mubarak on his trip. Netanyahu is very disinclined to freeze settlements, but it is a clear obligation of the Israeli government, and he does not want to look like

he is threatening the US-Israeli relationship for the sake of a bunch of settlers with whom most Israelis don't identify.

1:11 Tamara Cofman Wittes: Also, if Netanyahu is not comfortable with his coalition, and wants to move in a more moderate direction, all he has to do is invite Kadima into the government.

1:11 [Comment From Justin] Do you know if there have been any major disagreements between Sec. Clinton and the President on Middle East issues? Or have they been working well together?

1:12 Tamara Cofman Wittes: I don't know from the inside, but from the outside it looks as though they are in complete harmony -- they are using exactly the same language, delivering the same messages, and their work on this issue (like the Mitchell appointment itself) has been carefully coordinated. Despite the anticipation among many of a rocky relationship, they actually seem to work very well together.

1:12 [Comment From Bruce Blevins] The issue of cultural and sovereign respect seem to be very important to Middle Eastern nations. Why do you think it has been so hard for us to give them that respect? Is it Hamas and Hezbollah? It seems like it predates the age of terrorism.

1:15 Tamara Cofman Wittes: I don't think it's been so hard for us to give "them" that respect -- I think that there has been a period of time in which our usual national message of tolerance, pluralism, and openness was overridden. This was because of a) an upswing in really unfortunate prejudice after 9/11 against Arabs and Muslims, accompanied by steps like racial profiling in our immigration practices; and b) steps and language by the Bush Administration that made Muslims abroad feel that they were under attack. I am not judging those steps, I am just naming them. But I will tell you that if I had to go through what some of my Middle Eastern colleagues have had to go through at the airport coming into this country, I would feel pretty disrespected, too. That's treatment they expect from their own governments, not from the United States of America.

1:16 [Comment From John] How high are the stakes for the upcoming Lebanese elections, and is there any sense that the Western backed coalition could succeed.

1:17 Tamara Cofman Wittes: The Lebanese elections are important for what they symbolize more than because of their likely outcome. The outcome is likely to be very close, meaning that Lebanon's leading factions will once again seek a degree of consensus to support government decisions -- this country has never successfully worked on a winner-takes-all strategy.

1:18 Tamara Cofman Wittes: That said, Lebanon's elections are important because they are the second consecutive election since the 2005 pullout of Syrian forces and thus a real symbol of Lebanese sovereignty and independence. Everyone in the political elite there prizes the relative stability of the past few years (since 2006) and they want to protect that stability. I think that bodes well for Lebanon's future.

1:18 [Comment From alhakhem] Speaking of Syria, does Syria really want the Golan back/normalization with Israel? If a peace treaty were reached, would Assad be compelled to rescind the state of emergency that's been in place since 1963? It's that state of emergency that he uses to justify throwing the likes of Riad a-sayf, Kilo and others in jail accusing them of being working for "foreign agents". Is it possible that a peace agreement with Israel would shake the status quo to a degree that would threaten the Assad regime?

1:19 Tamara Cofman Wittes: A good question on the link between peace and democracy.

1:20 Tamara Cofman Wittes: There is little question that getting the Golan back would give Assad a huge nationalist boost inside Syria -- after all, he'd be doing what even his father failed to do! But without the conflict with Israel to justify high security spending and the state of emergency, it would be harder for the regime to justify acting on the slogan, "Let no voice rise higher than the voice of the battle."

1:21 Tamara Cofman Wittes: I don't think that a peace agreement with Israel would immediately lead to a collapse of the Syrian regime -- indeed, as I suggested, an agreement might actually give it a big boost in legitimacy. If I were a far-sighted Syrian leader, I would use that big boost to develop popular legitimacy on which I could rely, through open elections. But I don't expect that Assad will make that choice.

1:21 [Comment From schlomo] When there have been strong willing partners, for example King Hussein, Sadat, Rabin, Begin, maybe even Hafez, tangible strides in the peace process have still been very difficult to achieve. Now with a bunch of weaker less popular leaders, Abbas, Bashar, Bibi, Lieberman is it reasonable to expect that anything will be achieved if the principles remain the same?

1:21 Fred Barbash - Moderator: Last question, folks.

1:23 Tamara Cofman Wittes: It's true that peace is hard even in the best of circumstances. But visionary leaders can be game-changers. What we've got right now on the ground is a Gordian knot. It can be untied through patient, detailed, painstaking work; it might also be untied through some dramatic, game-changing action.

1:23 Tamara Cofman Wittes: The funny thing is, one would never have expected dramatic action from Begin and Sadat. You never know when a leader will emerge and take that bold step.

1:23 Fred Barbash-Moderator: I'd like to thank Tamara for joining us today and thank all of you for participating. We will be back next week with Brookings' Scouting Report - same time, same place.

Thanks to all.