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To Promote Peace, Move the Embassy

By Douglas J. Feith;

There is something more than Presidential politics behind the bills in Congress to relocate the United States Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. It is sensible policy.

If American support for Israel's sovereignty in Jerusalem remains an open question, will this help promote peace? No. Alternatively, are Israel's Arab interlocutors likelier to make the philosophical adjustments and political concessions necessary for peace if they know that America's support for Israel on Jerusalem is a closed question?

This view -- endorsed by the key Republican sponsors of the bills, Senators Bob Dole and Jon Kyl and the Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich -- has logic, though not the Clinton Administration, on its side.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the Arab-Jewish conflict over Palestine has been a fight over legitimacy. The Zionists have asserted that the Jews have the right to a state in at least part of Palestine. Arab anti-Zionists have argued that all of Palestine on both sides of the Jordan River is Arab land and that the Jews have no right to a state there.

In the conflict, periods of violence have alternated with periods of quiet, though hostility has persisted throughout. Quiet is a type of peace, but in recent years diplomacy has aimed at a higher type -- peace that is formal and de jure.

But Israel's experiences with Egypt and the Palestine Liberation Organization demonstrate that formal accords do not necessarily reflect or produce the highest form of peace -- that is, peace based on an absence of hostility.

True peace is possible only if Israel's Arab neighbors change their hearts and minds on the fundamental issue of Israel's legitimacy. What might facilitate that change? When Israel appeared vulnerable, it did not achieve peace, or even peace talks.

Only after being forced to acknowledge the strength of Israel's position -- its military power, its enduring ties to the United States, and, since the end of the cold war, our unchallenged global predominance -- did some Arab powers abandon rejectionist positions and start negotiating.

If Israel's antagonists bow to unpleasant realities and lower unrealistic expectations, the peace process may produce not merely signing ceremonies but real peace.

Inasmuch as the essence of the Arab-Israeli conflict is legitimacy, the essence of the legitimacy issue is Israel's right to sovereignty in Jerusalem. If Israelis do not have the right to sovereignty there, they can hardly justify sovereignty anywhere.

Jerusalem has been central to Jewish nationhood for 3,000 years. The Jews' national movement, after all, is Zionism, Zion being Jerusalem. The Arabs understand this, too, which is why the importance of Jerusalem in Arab politics, diplomacy, philosophy and literature increased as the struggle against Zionism intensified.

By relocating our embassy to Jerusalem, we would end our anomalous policy of refusing to recognize Israel's sovereignty in its own capital. We would proclaim that Israel's legitimacy in Zion is not an open question for us. This would signal that we expect all parties to the conflict -- not just Israel -- to pursue peace on the basis of realism.

In the ongoing Arab-Israeli negotiations, moving the embassy would not prejudice any issue that is actually open. This is why even dovish voices, like that of Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin, have categorically endorsed the bill. The Government of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin says it will in time negotiate Jerusalem issues, but not Israeli sovereignty. In this it deserves our support.

Across the political spectrum in Israel and among Jews worldwide, there is a profound commitment to retaining Jerusalem forever as the undivided capital. The cause of peace will be served by whatever helps persuade Yasir Arafat that he will not get American support or Israeli consent to divide Jerusalem and establish part of it as the capital of a new Arab state.

The necessary adjustment in expectations on the Arab side would be difficult and even painful. Passionate cries -- and worse -- would ensue, but in the end the process would be constructive.

Like all American pro-Israel initiatives, the bill to move the embassy is being deprecated in certain quarters as a cynical play for political points with American Jews. Such criticism is itself deeply cynical.

Every Congressional initiative pleases some constituencies and displeases others. Each is supported by some politicians for substantive reasons, some for political reasons and many for both types of reasons.

But support for Israel as a fellow democracy and strategic ally has been sustained by a long line of Democratic and Republican administrations and Congresses. It reflects the nation's strong sympathy for Israel as evinced in public opinion polls decade after decade since 1948.

The automatic assumption that a pro-Israel initiative is nothing more than pandering is unfair and at odds with America's national interest as most Americans see it.