

The Second Les Aspin Memorial Lecture: Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations—Peace, But Not Now

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Brief Analysis

Les Aspin was an extraordinary man. His life was consumed with ideas, and he spent much of his time trying to come up with ways to improve policy. He was always interested in the Middle East, and because of his interest, this memorial lecture will discuss how to improve the negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

The Middle East peace negotiations should be thought of in terms of strategy and politics. With the stalemate in the negotiations, three important questions need to be raised anew.

- Should Israel want to negotiate seriously a peace with the Palestinians?
- If "yes", should Israel want to negotiate sooner or later?
- If "yes" to the first question, and if Israel does want to negotiate sooner, how does one package a negotiating process that will work?

Should Israel negotiate? In the past, Israelis have been told many reasons why they should negotiate a peace agreement: to stop terrorism, to reap economic benefits, or simply to obtain peace. These are the wrong reasons to convince the Israelis. Terrorism exists whether negotiations are on or off. In Israel, terrorism occurred during the Rabin and Peres governments, and during Netanyahu's government as well; one cannot expect Israelis to believe that negotiations will stop terrorism. Economic success is also not a convincing argument. Israel's economy has been doing quite well despite the stalemate in the peace talks. As for the goal of peace itself, peace is a nice idea, but hard to sell when agreements have been made but not been kept. Who is to say that the next agreement will be adhered to?

These arguments might not be effective in convincing Israelis, but there are more persuasive arguments—namely, if Israel does not make a serious effort to negotiate, a strong possibility exists that Israel's own national identity and its relationship with the United States will suffer. It is difficult for a nation like Israel to maintain a sense of self or vitality if it is not viewed as actively seeking peace. Although the United States is still very supportive of Israel, and justly so, it is not true that Israel's good standing here is immutable. If Israel is regarded as an obstacle to peace, it will affect relations with the United States. It is thus in Israel's best interest to move forward on the negotiating front.

Now or later? Here, the key factor is Israel's strategic situation. If Israel is worse off now than it will be in the future, it is wise for it to wait; if Israel is better off now than it will be in the future, it is better off to make a peace deal now, from a position of strength. An assessment of the current situation suggests that Israel would be better off to move now. Today, Israel has a strong and growing relationship with Turkey and Jordan, but it is dangerous for Israel to assume that this relationship will stay the same in the future. Similarly, Israel's military position is probably at the highest level it will ever be; in the coming years, certain countries in the Middle East almost surely will produce weapons of mass destruction, thus creating a balance of terror against Israel's interests. Furthermore, although Israel may benefit from Europe's decline of importance in shaping policy and the rise of Asia, which has been more supportive of Israel, Asia's demand for energy will increase in the coming years, and Asians may begin to rely more

on Gulf Arabs and support their world view. Also, as stated previously, U.S. support for Israel could not be stronger than it has been in the last few years. Thus, because of Israel's powerful strategic position today, it has much incentive to negotiate now, because its power can only decline over time.

What should the shape of the negotiations? Given the answers to the first two questions, the open issue is how to shape negotiations that may work. To do so will require adherence to three basic principles. First, both parties must keep all existing agreements. If one or both parties are violating previous agreements, neither side will trust the other. If both parties want to be taken seriously, agreements must be respected; compliance with past accords is a basic ingredient for any future diplomatic success. Second, Jerusalem must not be discussed until the very end of the process; it is a "deal breaker" to address Jerusalem prematurely. Finally, a basic agreement between the two sides will be founded on the core idea of "terms" for the Palestinians and "time" for the Israelis.

This last idea is critical. If there is to be a peace agreement, it will almost certainly involve the creation of a Palestinian state. Even many Israelis, including hawks like Ariel Sharon, are coming around to this conclusion. In internal government planning documents, the United States has always assumed that this will be the case. Yet, Israel cannot accept a Palestinian state without trust and confidence in the Palestinians. If Israel accepted this idea, it would be taking all the risks up front. Therefore, much has to happen to convince Israel that Palestinian statehood is a risk worth taking. Israel might not be able to take all the risks now, but it can bear the risks of a longer timeframe agreement. Therefore, implementation of any statehood arrangement should be extended over a long period—ten to fifteen years—and should be completed in phases, each of which will have to be entirely completed before the subsequent phase begins. The Palestinians must demonstrate that they want to live in peace. This agreement will give the Israelis time to see that the Palestinians are sincere in wanting to make peace. If the Palestinians fail to live up to their side of the bargain in any interim stage, the process should stop.

Of course, no idea is without its problems. Previously, the tide of the movement in the process was so powerful that the process was pushed ahead before compliance with certain responsibilities. This is a very serious problem. To counter this problem, the United States needs to be a strong defender of the integrity of the agreement, insisting on full compliance every step of the way. Throughout the process, the United States must maintain its active role, particularly if this plan is implemented. Both parties look to the United States to legitimize what they have done.

Similarly, the long period of implementation may cause problems for the Palestinians, who are eager for a political solution and who see an increase in the number of Israeli settlers in the West Bank limiting the chances of their goal of statehood. But unless time is injected into the equation, it is highly unlikely that Israelis will agree to the risky proposition of creating an independent Palestinian state.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Elyse Aronson.

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