

The Peace Process:

View from a Likud Observer

Dec 24, 1997



Brief Analysis

Redeployments and Final Status: In recent weeks, the main focus of the peace process has been on the question of "further redeployments" of Israeli troops in the West Bank, as called for under the Oslo Accords. However, the redeployments—or "strokes," as they are known in Hebrew—are in reality a side issue. The fact that a great deal of energy is being applied to a distraction shows the lack of focus of those involved, including the United States, on the more serious issues of "final status negotiations." This next redeployment should be a function of the final status negotiations and not the other way around. According to the U.S.-brokered Hebron agreement, it is Israel's prerogative to set the magnitude of the withdrawal; on this point, Israel need not consult the Palestinian Authority. It is unnerving that the redeployment issue has become such a bone of contention, especially with the United States. There is nothing ambiguous, as has been suggested, about Israel's plans. There will be a further redeployment from certain areas, provided the Palestinian Authority abides by the Hebron agreement, which is so far not the case. If both parties had agreed to proceed directly with final status negotiations, then this unnecessary trouble and acrimony would have never occurred.

Interim Period: As envisioned originally in the Camp David accords, the idea of the five-year interim period was to provide time to build confidence among the parties before final status talks get under way. When first conceived, this period was needed by the Israeli leadership to convince Israelis that they can live in peace without the threat of violence and terrorism and that the Palestinians are a partner in this process. However, in practice, the interim period as laid out by Oslo has in fact been a "confidence-destroying process" for both Israelis and Palestinians. The intentions of the Oslo supporters were good, but they lacked political foresight and savvy. After the suicide bombs and the refusal of the Palestinian Authority to amend the National Charter, the process collapsed like a house of cards. Some people close to Rabin, although this is impossible to verify, say he would have stopped Oslo at one stage or another, given his deep concerns over security. What is known—and verified through Benjamin Netanyahu's electoral victory—is that Rabin and Peres were never able to overcome the growing doubts in people's minds after the initial terrorist attacks.

Frustration with the process is rampant on the Palestinian side. Listening to their leadership, Palestinians must have believed that economic prosperity, full sovereignty, a full withdrawal from the territories, and a capital in Jerusalem were just around the corner. Oslo has backfired on the Palestinian leadership as much as on the former Israeli leadership.

It is time to face the reality that the flawed Oslo framework, with its emphasis on an interim period of Israeli redeployments, can no longer be considered a relevant framework for the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. Oslo was a mistake and in fact may have delayed the chance of achieving peace. There are a new set of realities that can not be ignored, and a new formula, perhaps even a new agreement is needed to get things on the right track again.

Final Status Issues: A better solution is to skip the interim stage altogether and proceed directly to final status negotiations. What can the Palestinians hope to gain from this? After all, Oslo supposedly works in their favor. The

answer is that if the present process continues to wobble from crisis to crisis, not only will the Palestinians risk missing this historic opportunity for a fair settlement of their conflict with Israel—as they have done repeatedly since 1947—but they will also put at risk all they have accomplished since Madrid and the Oslo agreements. Only a center-right Israeli government can conclude a far reaching agreement based on concessions and compromises with the Palestinians while making it acceptable to the majority of Israelis and most Jewish people abroad. It is now time to take advantage of the presence of that center-right government to reach the final settlement of this conflict.

What might a future settlement between Israel and the Palestinians look like? The idea of a functional solution—Moshe Dayan's idea which, at one time, may have held the solution to the conflict—no longer applies. It seems that all Israeli governments—Left and Right—have accepted the idea of a territorial solution and the concept of "separation." This is what Rabin wanted and probably what Netanyahu intends. That means there will be maximum Palestinian self-government in large parts of the West Bank and Gaza with Israeli security zones that would include most of the settlements. These security zones would be territorially linked to Israel. The final lines, of course, are subject to negotiation. Certain security matters, especially security related foreign affairs, would be in the hands of Israel. The questions of Jerusalem and the Palestinian refugees should be left until the very end as they could destroy this stage of the peace process before it starts.

The U.S.-Israel relationship: Hopefully American diplomatic efforts will be directed towards the acceleration of final status talks. The redeployments, as outlined by the present interim agreement, are incompatible with any movement in that direction. The redeployment issue causes nothing more than continued disagreements on the road to final status negotiations. In addition, the issue of a "time-out" on settlement building can come to fruition only after final status talks are agreed to, along the Begin precedent after Camp David.

The recent strains in the U.S.-Israel relationship are very disconcerting. Mistakes have been made on both sides, relations have been squandered. The "special relationship" has not always been handled in the manner befitting something that is indeed very special. Every effort should be made on both sides to reestablish mutual trust on all levels, which is of the utmost importance going into final status negotiations. For Washington, it is important to recognize that Israeli people's profound disappointments with Oslo and the election of the Netanyahu government necessitate a change in policy toward the peace process. The perception of U.S. pressure on Israel has never helped to further the peace process. This is seen by the Palestinians as a license for continued intransigence. The situation was not helped by blaming the problems with the Arab coalition against Iraq on the lack of progress in the peace process. Furthermore, Israel should not adopt a policy of allowing the United States to be the driving force and catalyst in the process; Israel itself needs to be both active and proactive.

This Special Policy Forum Report prepared by Jonathan Lincoln.

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