

A Return to Camp David?

Accelerated 'Final-Status' Talks: A Debate

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Samuel Lewis served as U.S. ambassador to Israel under Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan.



Brief Analysis

Charles Krauthammer: Israelis and Palestinians should move immediately to accelerated final status negotiations. It is the only viable alternative to a failed Oslo process. The last three years of intensive diplomacy demonstrates that Oslo's premise is erroneous, serving to diminish rather than build confidence between the parties. Incrementalism undermines trust between the parties because each interim "accomplishment" is immediately followed by new issues, demands and, invariably, disappointments. For example, the fact that the Hebron agreement was the most ideologically significant agreement in the history of Zionism—with a Likud government relinquishing claims to a piece of Eretz Yisrael—was overshadowed by Palestinian disappointment over the next interim step, Israel's proposed 9 percent further redeployment. In the meantime, as Israel fulfills its list of Oslo commitments, the Palestinians do not fulfill theirs, always citing the need for Israel to supply the next concession. While the parties are struggling with the relatively insignificant interim issues, the really crucial questions—the final status issues—are deferred indefinitely. Thus, the Oslo process causes a deterioration of Israeli-Palestinian relations which incrementally diminishes the chances of successful final status talks.

In that vein, Oslo is not a peace process, but a "war" process. The Palestinians have not unconditionally renounced violence as a negotiating tactic, the very core of their Oslo commitment. While Israel relinquishes territory irreversibly, the Palestinians "suspend" violence periodically—when Arafat is satisfied with the pace at which Israel is retreating. Arafat's suspensions, however, are reversible; he turns violence on and off at will. The recent violence in the West Bank—organized in great part by Arafat's Fatah party—coupled with the recent Arab League summit resolution calling for freezing normalization with Israel, spells the death of the great Oslo "illusion." Israelis have realized the essential imbalance in Oslo's structure. In this environment, it is far better to address the "final status" issues now than to erode Israel's position further through the incrementalist process now underway.

Peter Rodman: Although Israel and the Palestinians are not now ready for another Camp David, it is time to discard the Oslo process and move directly to final status negotiations. The Oslo process is a diversion from the more salient final status issues. All parties will benefit from final status talks. For Israel, it is better to deal head-on with the difficult problems of final status—borders, settlements, Jerusalem, etc.—than to suffer a series of mini-clashes over the relatively unimportant interim issues. For Palestinians, final status would provide the opportunity for a good

deal on statehood and Jerusalem, given that Israel would be offered in return an irrevocable renunciation of all future claims. Final status negotiations might also prompt the formation of a national unity government in Israel which likely would be more responsive to Palestinian concerns. For the United States, final status negotiations could provide the perfect antidote to a dangerously deteriorating situation.

Changes in Israel have made the prospects for successful final status negotiations better than ever. Netanyahu appears to have accepted the general idea of limited Palestinian statehood that is the most likely outcome of any negotiations, and he has de facto maintained Rabin's policy on settlements. The Beilin-Eitan agreement between Labor and Likud parliamentarians—though unofficial—reveals unprecedented consensus on Israel's fundamental bargaining positions. In contrast to Labor, which had to "sneak up" incrementally to its idea of final status—a limited Palestinian state—Netanyahu is not so constrained and can sell an agreement to the Israeli public right now. Netanyahu will not play his hand, however, until final status negotiations begin.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST ACCELERATED TALKS

Richard Haass: The Oslo process is still the best course for both Israel and the Palestinians. Important interim agreements have been achieved, and unprecedented levels of cooperation between Israel and the Palestinians (as well as between Israel and the Arab world) have materialized. The history of Middle East peacemaking attests to the validity of Oslo's basic premise: incrementalism is the best way to foster the trust and confidence necessary for achieving peace. The problem with the current situation is one of a failure to implement agreements, not a failure of the agreements themselves.

For now, the parties need to focus on "making Oslo work," implementing the interim agreements and accomplishing what is "doable." Palestinians need to fulfill their commitments on security. Israel needs to promote Palestinian economic growth and refrain from creating new, or expanding existing, settlements. (Although Israel considers settlement activity a "right," politics sometimes demands that parties refrain from exercising rights when there are other priorities at stake.) Finally, the United States should play a more active role in the process. The United States cannot make one side do things that it does not want to, but presidential rhetoric is very powerful and should be used in support of American principles. Since the United States pays a political price in terms of Arab support for other Middle East policy priorities, such as containing Iraq and Iran, when the peace process falters, it should more readily and publicly voice its principles to preserve its credibility and safeguard its other important interests. Being seen as more principled and less partisan would also calm Palestinian nerves and make Arafat more amenable to compromise.

Nevertheless, only the parties can make peace. Ninety percent of the work of any accord must come from the parties themselves; no matter how active we are, the United States can only add the final five or ten percent to cap off a negotiating process. Therefore, only after the parties themselves have taken the crucial steps toward a final status agreement will an American-initiated Camp David-like framework be possible. If final status negotiations are conducted prematurely, the situation on the ground will unravel. Currently, Netanyahu and Arafat both lack the will and the political strength to reach a final agreement, let alone implement one, and the Israeli and Palestinian publics are unprepared to accept one.

Samuel Lewis: Comparing the "elements of ripeness" in the original Camp David scenario with the current situation suggests that the ingredients for a Camp David-like success are not now in place. First, the West Bank issue is central to Zionist ideology in a way that the Sinai issue was not. Second, unlike before Camp David, the intensive preparatory diplomacy necessary for success has been lacking; there has not been the kind of secret diplomacy needed to formulate the outline of a final agreement. Third, justifiably or not, the Palestinians and other Arabs perceive President Clinton, in contrast to President Carter, as too close to Israel, and therefore not objective enough to be a disinterested mediator. Finally, today's Israeli, Palestinian, and U.S. leaders seem to lack the statesmanship,

leadership, and popular confidence that enabled Begin, Sadat, and Carter to make Camp David I succeed. Given these contrasts with the past, moving to Camp David now is a "recipe for disaster." And we should recall, there are no second chances after a failed summit effort.

It is crucial that the parties live up to the commitments they have already made and work within the framework of Oslo. Final status negotiations should begin now—as stipulated under the Oslo accords—but simultaneously with further progress on the interim commitments. Incrementalism, to develop trust and confidence between the parties, remains the right approach.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Greg Saiontz.

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