

Hebron As 'Oslo III': Implications for the Peace Process

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Brief Analysis

The still-imminent agreement on Israeli redeployment in Hebron, though just technically a protocol detailing the implementation of one article of the Oslo II accord, has begun to assume the magnitude of "Oslo III." Not only does it represent the first-ever agreement between a Likud-led government and the Palestinians, but by accepting the concept of pulling the Israel Defense Forces out of 80 percent of Hebron a site whose religious sanctity for Jews is second only to Jerusalem Benjamin Netanyahu will demonstrate his acceptance of the principle of "partition." By permitting the IDF redeployment, the Likud ends once and for all any dream of maintaining exclusive Israeli control over "Greater Eretz Israel," with the Prime Minister already signaling his accommodation to the eventual emergence of a Palestinian "state-like" entity. In this sense, the Hebron agreement is an historic document that reflects Likud's conversion to the basic tenets of the Rabin-Peres approach to peacemaking with the Palestinians.

Likely Israeli Reactions: "Hebron then and forever" is the slogan of many who voted Netanyahu into office last May, hoping to derail the Oslo process. One should not underestimate the ferocity of their anger at Netanyahu's "betrayal" of their trust by accepting the Hebron agreement. The attempt by the apparently lone, mentally unstable soldier to carry out a massacre in the Hebron market, fortuitously frustrated by on-the-spot IDF soldiers, only serves as an extreme example of the potential for turmoil in the wake of the accord. At least eight ministers of Netanyahu's cabinet are planning to vote against the agreement. They not only include Ariel Sharon, Zeev Binyamin Begin and Rafal Eitan, but perhaps even the prime minister's closest associates, Mrs. Limor Livnat and Tzahi Hanegbi. When the deal is eventually submitted to a Knesset vote, support from left-of-center opposition parties may prove to be Netanyahu's safety net.

> Once the prime minister succeeds in winning cabinet and Knesset endorsement for a Hebron accord, momentum for a National Unity Government is bound to increase. Netanyahu and the man he defeated, Shimon Peres, have already agreed that once Netanyahu is prepared to explore the possibility, talks will be held between only the two of them, with no intermediaries. So far, they have had several private discussions in which Netanyahu hinted that he was only awaiting approval of the 1997 budget (passed by the Knesset in the early hours of January 1) and the final agreement on Hebron before deciding to move forward on a National Unity Government. Formation of a Likud-Labor

"Grand Coalition" is, of course, a highly complicated exercise. Yet both Netanyahu and Peres apparently believe that, politics aside, they would be able to reach an understanding on Israeli strategy toward negotiations with both the Palestinians and the Syrians. On the Syria talks, they can formulate a general commitment to hold a national referendum on the draft of a peace treaty, without introducing explicit language regarding the extent of territorial concessions they would be willing to countenance to achieve it; this would blur substantial differences between them. However, on the principles of "final status" negotiations with the Palestinians, as well as the map detailing Israel's three "further redeployments" in the West Bank (as stipulated under Oslo), they are in fact quite close to each other's perspectives. (Peres' would-be successor Ehud Barak already proposed in public to postpone the last of the redeployments until September 1998 a proposal much in line with Netanyahu's intentions.)

> The Hebron deal sets the clock ticking on those redeployments. Even if Netanyahu avoids spelling out the dates of the second and third redeployments, as demanded by Arafat, fixing a date for the first redeployment (a few weeks following the completion of the Hebron implementation) actually commits Netanyahu to conclude the third stage by a year later, i.e., early 1998. That is because Oslo II stipulates six-month intervals between each of the three stages. Here, it is significant that whatever reciprocal commitments Arafat may make to Netanyahu on taking steps to curb terrorism, the American paper (technically, a "Note to the Record") that will outline these commitments will establish no clear linkage between, on the one hand, the Palestinian Authority's security measures and its promise to honor other Oslo obligations (e.g., final annulment of the PLO Charter) and, on the other hand, Israel's relinquishing of more territory in Areas B and C to the Palestinians.

The Nexus between the Palestinian and the Syrian Tracks: Israel has always felt that it is imperative to reach a deal with Syria before the third and really crucial stage of "further redeployment," which will finalize the map for the rest of the interim period and become the basis for the "final status" discussions. Jerusalem believes it is important to save the final round with Arafat until after achieving peace with Syria, so as to weaken Arafat's bargaining power at the moment when the most critical decisions are being made about the future of the territories. A crisis with Arafat seems inevitable at this point. Whatever concessions Israel offers in the rural areas of the West Bank will fall short of his ambitions. In view of September's riots triggered by Arafat after the opening of the Hasmonean Tunnel Israelis and Palestinians no longer exclude the danger of another, more violent confrontation between Palestinian police and the IDF. Since September, a fresh outbreak of hostilities has become a very real scenario in the event of a stalemate. Securing peace with Syria is therefore of primary importance.

For his part, Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad has advised Arafat against "rushing" into a deal with Israel "over one street" in Hebron. By implication, Damascus is effectively proposing to close ranks with Arafat and "merge" the two tracks of the peace process -- that is, to link together Palestinian and Syrian negotiations with Israel with the backing of a unified Arab front sponsored by Egypt. (Incidentally, Egypt's President Mubarak has so far proven less helpful in assisting Arafat to make a deal than U.S. Special Envoy Dennis Ross would have wished. In recent weeks, there seems to be a clear preference in Cairo to move from behind-the-scenes involvement in both tracks to a high profile, more active, substantive role in the negotiations.) A "merger" of the two tracks under the umbrella of Arab coordination could deprive Israel of two of late Prime Minister Rabin's strategic achievements splitting the Arab interlocutors into their own national tracks and obtaining Assad's commitment not to link his own peace (or the pace of his peace talks) to the outcome of the Palestinian-Israeli haggling. However, strong U.S. pressure and a last-minute change of heart by the Egyptians may encourage Arafat to cut short his stalling tactics.

Regional Implications: Viewed strategically, it is now hoped that the Hebron deal will arrest the deterioration of the peace process which began with the February/March 1996 suicide bombings inside Israeli urban centers, was accentuated by the Israel-Hizbollah confrontation in Lebanon in May and then worsened with Netanyahu's performance in his first six months in office. The balance sheet of the past ten months can be summed up as follows:

In many ways, cold peace has soured into cold war between Egypt and Israel, with an escalation into a confrontational mode of diplomacy coupled with an offensive posture of propaganda warfare. The progress of normalization between Israel and the Arab states of the Gulf and North Africa has been formally suspended. Israeli-Syrian negotiations are stuck over Assad's demand that Netanyahu reaffirm all commitments made by the Labor government in previous rounds and that peace talks start where they left off. Jordan's relations with Israel have cooled considerably, with the resulting loss of close and continual coordination. The Arms Control/Regional Security Talks, part of the very promising multilateral component of the peace process, are deadlocked over Egyptian-Israeli disagreement on the nuclear issue and even attempts to breathe life into them through informal "track two" seminars face growing difficulties.

By itself, the Hebron agreement cannot be expected to transform this gloomy picture. It does, however, grant a few months of grace in which to reactivate Israeli-Syrian dialogue, almost surely via U.S. mediation. Otherwise, a new Israeli-Palestinian crisis over control of Areas B and C will again dominate the Middle Eastern scene.

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