

Likud and the Oslo Process: Implications of a Hebron Accord

Jan 3, 1997



Brief Analysis

If negotiators overcome eleventh-hour Palestinian demands and conclude an agreement on Hebron redeployment, this accord would mark a milestone in the Middle East peace process: the first signed agreement between a Likud government and the Palestinians. With significant U.S. encouragement, the two sides will have managed to overcome the intense acrimony and bitterness that only three months ago claimed scores of lives and took the peace process to the precipice of collapse. The nearly hundred days of haggling since the Washington Summit -- sparked by the Netanyahu government's demand for improved security arrangements for the some 400 Israeli residents of Hebron and then fueled by Arafat's desire to take advantage of global sympathy to win concessions on non-Hebron issues -- may come to be seen by future historians as a critical turning point in the peace process, i.e., the moment when the Likud abandoned elements of its core ideology for the sake of accommodation with the Palestinians.

The Hebron Conundrum: Israel's redeployment in Hebron completes the implementation of IDF withdrawals from the seven major Palestinian population centers, as called for in the September 1995 PLO-Israel accord (Oslo II). For the agreement's original Israeli negotiators, Hebron was such a thorny issue that its provisions outlining IDF redeployment from the city were separate and significantly more complex than those delineating withdrawal from other cities and towns in Gaza and the West Bank. Indeed, pulling IDF troops out of four-fifths of Hebron was seen as so potentially explosive and politically costly, that the Labor government of Shimon Peres balked at fulfilling that provision of the Oslo II accord. Having campaigned on a platform just six months earlier to bring enhanced security to the Israeli people (not to mention scathingly critical of the Oslo accords themselves), it is not surprising that Prime Minister Netanyahu found it nearly impossible to fulfill a provision his predecessor refused to implement.

> Reinterpreting Hebron's future security arrangements was a political necessity for Netanyahu, who was elected on a platform calling for a different approach to negotiating with Israel's Arab interlocutors. To fulfill his ill-defined pledge to achieve "peace with security," Netanyahu relented on peace-making with the PLO, but demanded an agreement that he could describe as an improvement upon the original Labor-negotiated deal. The new agreement -- which reportedly includes separate protocols governing civilian and security regimes for Israeli settlers and Israelis visiting the Tomb of the Patriarchs -- does appear to improve security arrangements for Israeli Hebron residents in several ways, including provisions for joint Israeli-Palestinian patrols in elevated areas outside the one-fifth of the city under IDF control and restrictions on the height of Palestinian construction in sensitive spots in the city. Yet the Likud leader nonetheless conceded several of his earlier security demands, such as the right for the IDF to pursue suspected Palestinian terrorists into Arab areas of Hebron after withdrawal ("hot pursuit"), a ban on automatic weaponry for the Palestinian municipal police, and an enlarged buffer area between the Palestinian and Israeli areas of Hebron.

A Pandora's Box: In considering the Oslo text amendable where necessary in order to get a better Hebron arrangement, Netanyahu inadvertently reopened negotiations to new demands from the Palestinians. When Israelis

demanded the Palestinians live up to their prior agreements (e.g., amending the PLO Charter, vigilance in combating terrorism and confiscating illegal weapons), the Palestinian Authority responded by demanding that Israel fulfill its earlier pledges (e.g., allowing for the safe passage of Palestinian transport between Gaza and the West Bank and the release of Palestinian women prisoners still in Israeli jails.) Turning the tables on Netanyahu's "reciprocity" argument not only provided Arafat with a chance to reestablish credibility among his constituents (the Palestinian leader had been unable to mobilize a Palestinian strike against Israel's security-driven closure of the territories in the months prior to the Hasmonean tunnel opening), but it also allowed the Palestinians to extract concessions from an Israeli premier already besieged and under rebuke from within his own party, the security establishment, the ruling coalition, and international public opinion. The PA was able to do this by holding fast to the principle articulated by Palestinian Cabinet Secretary Ahmed Abdel-Rahman that "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed" at a time when Netanyahu was eager to conclude a deal.

With agreement on the actual terms of the accord essentially in place some time ago, the Palestinians have capitalized upon domestic and international condemnation of Israel's pledge of enhanced future settlement activity to hold up an agreement until they won assurances that a Hebron redeployment would be linked to Israel's implementation of other aspects of Oslo. These assurances are reportedly contained in the side-letters expected to be exchanged between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and in a U.S. letter of understanding to be delivered to both sides. In the most immediate sense, the most significant of these is Israel's assurance that the IDF will undertake three further West Bank redeployments, in six-month intervals, the scope of which were left vague in the Oslo accords. Fearing that Netanyahu's recent suggestion to skip the remaining items in the "interim period" and move immediately to "final status negotiations" was actually a trick to avoid these redeployments, the Palestinians have seized upon the Israeli government's weak international standing and strong desire to reach an agreement to extract a "road map" from the Israelis on how the peace process will proceed beyond Hebron.

An Ideological Shift? Though Netanyahu apparently decided to "do the Hebron deal" many weeks ago, the road to accepting redeployment in the most ancient of Jewish cities was still tortuous. At its core, accepting redeployment appears to have forced Netanyahu and Likud colleagues to confront the difficult choice between accepting the political implications of the Oslo Accords and remaining loyal to a "Revisionist" ideology for which those implications are anathema. Evidence that the new prime minister has opted for the former can be found in the unprecedented statements of his senior advisor, David Bar-Illan, declaring "Greater Israel" no longer "viable" and suggesting that the Likud may be willing to accept a "limited" Palestinian state. Not only were Bar Illan's comments to the Jerusalem Post a clear deviation from heretofore cardinal Likud tenets, but he even went so far as to say there is now little ideological difference between Labor and Likud. And while these comments only elicited a mild rebuke from the Prime Minister -- who characterized them as a personal rather than a government view -- they were endorsed by others within his coalition, such as the National Religious Party's Avraham Stern, much to the chagrin of Stern's party.

Perhaps more indicative of an eroding pillar of Likud ideology is the near completion of a set of understandings, negotiated at weekly Knesset meetings between key Likud and Labor party leaders, reportedly outlining areas of national consensus for a "final status agreement" with the Palestinians. Seeking to bridge their differences, these talks have apparently been based on an unpublicized agreement between former Labor Minister Yossi Beilin and senior Palestinian advisor Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), which allows for Israel to annex its most populous settlements in the western part of the West Bank along the Green Line in exchange for territorial compensation elsewhere.

Indeed, while the Hebron agreement and its ratification of the Oslo process deviate from some of the Likud's core beliefs, the Prime Minister's more ideologically committed coalition partners and the settler groups who voted

overwhelmingly for him probably do not have the power to thwart the new accord. Yet in an attempt to retain their support, Netanyahu is likely to sanction the continued (perhaps even accelerated) growth of existing settlements within their current boundaries, i.e., more settlers but neither more settlements nor territorial expansion of existing settlements. However, the irony is that should this growth focus on settlements just across the Green Line in the western portion of the West Bank, where 70 percent of the settlers reside, the government's policy would in fact tend to validate the Beilin-Abu Mazen plan, signaling continued passage along -- rather than a new roadblock on -- the road from Oslo.

Robert Danin is a scholar-in-residence at The Washington Institute, on leave from the Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research. The opinions and analysis expressed here are solely his own and do not necessarily reflect those of the State Department.

Policy #114

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Ben Fishman

[\(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

[\(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Facing Syria's Food Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Ishtar Al Shami

(/policy-analysis/facing-syrias-food-crisis)

TOPICS

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)