

The Past, Present, and Future of the Oslo Process:

View from the Labor Party

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Brief Analysis

When Likud won Israel's May 1996 elections, Netanyahu announced that he would implement the Oslo agreement. However, the prime minister appears to be undecided as to how to do so. He is trying to muddle through the peace process, gauging American and Arab reactions before determining a course of action. Is Netanyahu "Israel's DeGaulle," who will contradict his own political platform and surprise the world by achieving peace? Or will he "shuffle his feet" and blame the Palestinian side for deadlock in negotiations? The answer may lie in whether Netanyahu signs a Hebron agreement next week with Arafat, which is very possible. This milestone could lead to the implementation of the interim agreement.

Netanyahu also has to decide whether he wants to discuss final status negotiations with the Palestinians before or after the implementation of the interim agreement. Although the Palestinians and Israelis agreed to complete final status negotiations dealing with the issues of Jerusalem, borders, refugees, and settlements by May 4, 1999, Netanyahu has the option of negotiating a settlement before that date. In any case, the prime minister has already made his position on a permanent solution clear; he envisions a Palestinian entity that resembles territory with the right to hold a referendum on sovereignty, like Puerto Rico, or a demilitarized state, like Andorra.

Interim or Permanent Agreement?

Netanyahu's comments about Puerto Rico or Andorra as a model for final status spurred a debate in Israel over the prime minister's intentions and the future of the peace process. According to one school of thought, discussion of permanent status demonstrates Netanyahu's insincerity toward the peace process. This school thinks that the prime minister only publicly agreed to implement the Oslo accords because of Israeli public opinion and international pressure. By immediately discussing final status negotiations, Netanyahu can skip the interim agreement altogether and postpone redeployment until final negotiations are concluded. Unfortunately if final status talks actually begin before Israel withdraws from the occupied territories and the Palestinians find Israeli final status offers unacceptable, the region would be left without an interim or a permanent agreement.

The other school believes that Netanyahu's consideration of final status actually illustrates the prime minister's dedication to the peace process. This school feels that it is strategically important to consider the final status solution while implementing the interim agreement. The implementation timetable established by the Labor party divided Israeli redeployment into stages set to conclude on three dates: September 7, 1996; March 7, 1997; and September 7, 1997. The next steps in the Oslo accords are not important until September 7, 1997 when Israel will redeploy to specified military locations for the last time under the interim agreement. Although the Palestinians and Israelis are not supposed to consider the interim solution while negotiating the final status accords, the borders set by this Israeli redeployment will be difficult to change in future negotiations. If Netanyahu can secure a permanent treaty with the Palestinians before September 7, 1997, Israel will be able to dictate the borders between the Jewish state and a Palestinian entity.

By originally convincing the Palestinians to agree to an interim solution before a final one as set out by the Oslo accords, Israel scored a victory in the negotiations. Israel can unilaterally control the extent of redeployment. But Israel has become a victim of its own success. Without a specific agreement, extremists on both sides have taken advantage of the inconclusiveness of Oslo. The more quickly permanent status talks begin and final negotiations conclude, the less chance these factions will have to destroy the peace process. Therefore, the Israeli government should negotiate a final status solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict while implementing the interim agreement.

The Final Status Agreement

When Labor was in power, Yossi Beilin conducted secret, informal discussions with Abu-Mazen about a permanent treaty. They discussed final status issues such as a Palestinian entity, borders, settlements, refugees, and Jerusalem. The resulting proposals from the talks could still serve as a bridge between Palestinians and Israelis in the era of Likud. According to the proposals, Israel would recognize a demilitarized Palestinian state with all the attributes of sovereignty. Additionally, Israel would annex a portion of the occupied territories, including Israeli settlements close to 1967 borders. The two parties would also exchange territory to widen both the Gaza Strip and Israel's narrow portions along the Mediterranean Sea. Security arrangements would be made for the Jewish settlers living in Palestinian territory if they would not accept compensation and move within Israeli borders. Although Arab refugees could not return to sovereign Israel, the Israeli government would not limit immigration into a Palestinian state.

Beilin and Abu-Mazen also reached a tentative understanding about Jerusalem. For Palestinians, Jerusalem is the geographic area of Al-Quds whose borders are much wider than Israel's municipal boundaries of Jerusalem. Therefore, the state of Palestine could include the Temple Mount and the portions of Al-Quds not recognized as Jerusalem. Palestinians would recognize West Jerusalem as the Israeli capital and Israel would recognize the portion of Al-Quds under Palestinian sovereignty as the Palestinian capital. Jerusalem would be divided into boroughs of Palestinians, religious Jews, and secular Israelis. A municipal government would unite the city of Jerusalem but local authorities would oversee daily life within the boroughs. Arab residents within Israeli borders could be citizens of the Palestinian state. Lastly, East Jerusalem would be declared a "disputed area." This complicated agreement effectively deals with the delicate issues surrounding the question of Jerusalem without opening a "Pandora's box." Although this nonbinding agreement could not take into account any negotiations with third parties, an actual future agreement must also include multilateral arrangements with Jordan and Christian religious authorities.

The Abu-Mazen and Beilin solution is not a panacea but the logical outcome of Palestinian-Israeli cooperation. There might be other solutions but neither party should wait to sign an agreement in the hopes of securing greater concessions. There will not be large differences between this arrangement and any other agreement reached by Likud. If a permanent solution is not completed by May 4, 1999, frustrations could lead to violence by extremists on both sides. This could cause the end of the peace process.

As a result of the meetings between Beilin and Abu-Mazen, Labor has a realistic vision of a fair final status agreement. Recently, Labor and Likud have begun a dialogue to search for a "common denominator" between the left and the right. The meetings focus on establishing a permanent solution without neglecting the next phases of the interim agreement. Likud recognizes that a final Palestinian-Israeli agreement is conducive to the beginning of a new chapter in the region. For example, peace treaties with Syria and Lebanon are likely to occur and a Middle East union, like ASEAN, would potentially develop to bolster the region's security concerns. The Labor and Likud parties both believe that it is in Israel's best interests to create a coherent Israeli policy on final status agreements as soon as possible.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Rachel Ingber.

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