

Prospects for Arab-Israeli Peace -- 1995:

A Trip Report

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Brief Analysis

On December 13, 1994, four participants of The Washington Institute's study group to the Middle East addressed a Policy Forum on the prospects for the peace process in the coming year: Dr. Joseph Sisco, former undersecretary of state; Dr. Graeme Bannerman, former staff director of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; Fred Barnes, senior editor of The New Republic; and Dr. Robert Satloff, executive director of The Washington Institute. Their assessments are based on meetings held with senior officials in Syria, Jordan, Israel, West Bank, and Gaza. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

JOSEPH SISCO

Despite his frail appearance on television, in person Syrian President Hafez al-Assad retains his vigor and vitality. Assad reconfirmed his commitment to an "honorable and dignified peace." He was deeply interested in the effect the Republican congressional election victory will have on U.S. support of the peace process.

From discussions in Damascus and Jerusalem, it is clear that the gap between Syria and Israel remains wide. Assad perceives peace in two phases. The first phase -- formal peace -- occurs only after complete Israeli withdrawal from the Golan. Only then can normalization develop in the second phase. Prime Minister Rabin, on the other hand, perceives peace in incremental stages, with Israel requiring elements of peace and normalization to match any withdrawal.

Assad offered no hints of compromise on demands for peace on his terms, nor does he show any sense of urgency in reaching an agreement with Israel. Assad dismissed suggestions that he had a role to play in effecting Israeli public opinion through acts of public diplomacy, saying he would take care of Syrian public opinion and it was up to Israeli leaders to take care of Israeli public opinion. Similarly, he rejected the idea of a summit meeting with Rabin, saying that it could lead to misunderstandings that actually worsen the situation. It appears the Israel-Syria negotiations will continue at a slow pace with neither a breakthrough nor breakdown in the near future.

GRAEME BANNERMAN

Assad is deeply concerned that any peace with Israel be made with dignity, fearing the humiliation that he believes

Anwar Sadat, Yasser Arafat, and King Hussein faced after making peace with Israel. He rejects the Oslo Accords and the Israel-Jordan peace treaty as steps toward comprehensive peace and suggests that regional states that have made moves toward normalization with Israel will now reassess their position in light of the lack of progress in the Israel-Syria front. Given the wide disparity in fundamental conceptions of peace, there is little likelihood of imminent breakthrough.

Peace and the Palestinians

The mood in Gaza has improved since the implementation of the Cairo accords and the departure of Israeli soldiers from Gaza's cities and towns. However, control is slipping away from Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Authority, which have to balance often competing demands from Israel, the local Palestinian population, and the international donor community. The economic situation in Gaza has worsened over the past year and there is no visible sign that international aid has improved Palestinian quality of life. The international community needs to risk accelerating the donor process in order to bolster the Palestinian Authority, which in turn will be strengthened in the popular view vis-à-vis Hamas. As of now, Hamas appears very self-confident and believes events are moving inexorably in its direction.

FRED BARNES

Syria believes Israeli compromise is the key to a negotiating breakthrough, but in reality, the key ingredient would be a clear public gesture from Damascus. Israeli leaders appear willing to make far-reaching compromises in the substance of the talks but stand no chance of convincing the Israeli public of the wisdom of an Israel-Syria peace agreement without Assad being forthcoming in public diplomacy, which he is apparently unwilling to do. Without change on the public front, the Syrian-Israeli track will remain secondary to the Israeli-Palestinian track, which is an urgent concern to all parties.

Middle Easterners generally have inflated expectations of U.S. aid. They tend to view it as a right, earned from actions pursued in their own self-interest. The U.S. has a role to play in supporting peace and in helping the peacemakers, but it needs to dampen expectations. At the same time, U.S. aid needs to be more effective and efficient, two qualities which the A.I.D. effort in Gaza, for example, sorely lack. Road building and trash disposal, two areas of American expertise, would make a world of a difference in an area as impoverished as Gaza.

ROBERT SATLOFF

After three years without substantive progress, the Israeli-Syrian negotiations are in neutral. This is because, as President Assad said, the two sides hold profoundly different conceptions of peace. Moreover, while there are incentives for peace, there are few pressures to compromise. This sense of urgency may grow in several months but, in the meantime, the focus of the peace process will be on sustaining the Palestinian track while fending off attempts to freeze the incremental normalization now underway between Israel and the wider Arab world.

Inside Gaza, Yasser Arafat is trying to shore up his weak role by expanding the security forces by bringing in local Fatah "intifadah veterans" who had previously been marginalized. The Palestinian Authority wants to avoid a military showdown with Hamas and would rather display political strength to cow the opposition. In this regard, elections are important for Arafat. Israel recognizes the role of elections to boost Arafat's legitimacy and is trying to find some formula for partial West Bank redeployment that would permit elections without endangering security for settlers and those transiting West Bank roads. At the same time, Israel needs Arafat to be more clear and forthright in his efforts to prevent and reject violence.

In Jordan, the focus now is to show tangible benefits of the King's strategic move toward peace. This will require Jordanians to be more entrepreneurial in their approach to both foreign investment and international aid, as well as to lower inflated expectations about U.S. assistance. At the same time, it is essential that the U.S. and its allies do

their part directly and indirectly. A key effort should be to use our offices to convince Saudi Arabia to open its borders to Jordanian exports and to secure Gulf oil to replace Iraqi oil to Jordan -- initiatives that don't cost U.S. taxpayers money but would be a huge boost to Jordan.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Shira Vickar. ❖

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