

The Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

Dr. Pollock addresses various facets of the latest peace talks during testimony before the French legislature.

The following is an English translation of testimony originally released in French.

Daniel Reiner, Committee Vice-Chairman: Mr. David Pollock is a fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the political dynamics of Middle Eastern countries. He was previously a diplomatic advisor for the Broader Middle East in the U.S. Department of State. He provided strategic expertise on questions of democracy and the possibilities for reform in that region, with special emphasis on women's rights. He served in several other advisory posts in the department covering South Asia and the Middle East, including four years as the regional expert on the Policy Planning Staff. Mr. Pollock was also a professor at Harvard University and an adjunct professor at George Washington University. He has traveled extensively in the Middle East and maintains a wide network of contacts inside governments, academe, and business throughout the region. He is therefore a major expert on these issues.

I thank you for having come before us to clarify our understanding of the current situation in the region, in particular regarding the peace process. In the past, our committee has worked a great deal on this question, but the situation evolves every day, so it is indispensable to provide regularly updated analysis. In order to open the discussion, permit me to pose a very general question: What in your view are the main reasons for the impasse in the peace process, and can one hope this process will resume in a reasonable fashion?

David Pollock: Thank you very much. I am here to offer my insights on the current situation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and in the negotiations conducted under the auspices of U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry.

That situation is not very clear. But, in my view, this is actually a good sign. For the first time in around twenty years, since the Oslo Accords, they have succeeded in keeping the details of negotiations secret. That is a good thing. Preventing leaks makes it more possible to move toward sensible decisions.

I note that the hardliners, on both sides, are objecting to these negotiations. For example, Mr. Naftali Bennett

yesterday criticized the suggestion by Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu that some of the settlements could remain in place under Palestinian rule. Perhaps that is just a dream, to see settlers remaining secure in that way; but Mr. Bennett called it "crazy." So if the extremes are becoming more radical, that means the negotiations are moving in a positive direction, in the sense that they are serious. The extremes are beginning to envisage a possible agreement, at least in principle. And once a framework agreement like that is concluded, the negotiations could continue, without unilateral Palestinian accession to the UN, without an Intifada...

As for the Palestinian side, too, I would point out that Mr. Abbas said, on the occasion of the Nelson Mandela memorial service in South Africa -- and in Arabic, to the TV channel al-Arabiya -- that he does not support a boycott against Israel. Rather, he is seeking to negotiate with Israel. This is both remarkable and paradoxical to witness, even as in Europe one finds movements promoting just such a boycott. And when certain Palestinians then tried to minimize the significance of Abbas's position, this was also a good sign. For when the hardliners on both sides criticize their leaders' policies, it means the leaders are moving toward an agreement.

There are some obstacles to peace that are well known, the "traditional" obstacles: the question of the borders of a future Palestinian state, the security of Israel after this accord, the questions of Jerusalem, of refugees, of settlements. But at the same time, the research I conducted has shown that other obstacles, less known, also lie in the path of the negotiators: hate speech and incitement to violence, on both sides. Nevertheless, fighting against this problem also offers an opportunity -- because that could assist the resolution of the other problems.

Let us distinguish the nature of this hate speech and incitement to violence on one side or the other.

In Israel, the problem concerns individuals. These may be settler, among whom a few commit violence against Palestinians. But this is not authorized by the Israeli government, which is now actively fighting against this phenomenon; belatedly, in such an active way, but nonetheless so. For example, Mr. Ya'alon, the Minister of Defense, who is known as a tough guy on matters of Israeli security, characterized attackers of Palestinian villages as "terrorists," implying that the Israeli government should fight against them exactly in the same way it fights against Palestinian terrorism.

But on the Palestinian side, alas, from President Abbas, to his Cabinet, to the official media, one must note that every day, Palestinian terrorists who perpetrated assaults are considered heroes. This is the official discourse, which works against peace and which encourage violence and terrorism. It is clearly a case of double-talk and mixed messaging, which on one side professes peace and of tolerance, while the other side supports violence and anti-Semitism. And I am not even speaking of Hamas in Gaza.

Every day, official Palestinian television calls Jews "rats" and "animals." This is repugnant. On the official Facebook page of Palestinian schools, one sees photographs of Hitler, and cartoons that illustrate the hadith (statements attributed to the prophet Mohammed) saying that Muslims must kill the Jews before the Last Judgment ("Yom al-Din").

To be fair, one must also recognize that, even so, there has been some progress in Palestinian discourse. For example, Palestinian school textbooks are better than in the past. But there remain many problems, much incitement and hate speech.

I have come to the conclusion that this problem is a serious one, yet soluble. One can imagine international efforts to combat this hatred. For example, if European governments object to Israeli settlements, that is legitimate. But why not also protest against official Palestinian hate speech?

If the Palestinian government stays on this course, the Israeli public will not approve by referendum the compromise found in the framework agreement of the peace process -- knowing that the Palestinians want their territory to include Jaffa and Haifa, and more. So whoever wants peace must combat hate speech. One could condition European

and American financial aid to the Palestinian Authority on its cessation of such speech.

One could denounce such speech, at high levels, while also encouraging positive messages. When Mr. Abbas says he opposes a boycott, Mr. Netanyahu does not say that he appreciates this. Similarly when Mr. Abbas renounces his wish to exercise the right of return as a refugee from Safed. Still, one must keep well in mind that, at the same time, Mr. Abbas says that terrorists are heroes. One comes to believe that Palestinian messages are not sincere.

This is undoubtedly not the only problem in the Middle East peace process. Nor is it a precondition for negotiations. But it is a sufficiently serious problem to elevate its significance in those negotiations. If one did that, it could help in the resolution of other problems. I am optimistic about the prospect of achieving peace. Yet one of the means for achieving it is precisely the fight against incitement to hatred by the Palestinians.

Responses to Questions

On *BDS*: It is true that while the Palestinians do not officially support boycotts against Israel, they do support boycotts against products from the Israeli settlements. This is within reason, legitimate; yet in some sense it does not promote peace. In a state of peace, it will be necessary to live together. Instead, this tactic could lead to a condition of fear, of anxiety, and of resistance to compromise. That does not serve the interests of the Palestinians themselves.

In Europe, there is a movement that supports a boycott against Israel. That is illogical and absurd. One should rather encourage the two parties to reach out to each other.

On Syria, Iran, the PA and Hamas: Regarding Syria, I would say that the current situation is a human, political, and military catastrophe, for the Syrians and for the region. The only small good point about it is that Israel has decided not to intervene, and not to get dragged in to this conflict. This is an Israeli choice.

Personally I have many criticisms of U.S. policy toward Syria. The U.S. could have supported the opposition, to assist democracy. It is not yet too late, but I don't think the U.S. is going to change its policy. The Geneva conference is not yielding any results. It is literally a "zero-sum" diplomatic game.

I was myself, not too long ago, on the Syrian-Turkish border. I saw the refugees, the wounded fighters. I believe that in the future, we will think of the Syrian situation as we think today of Rwanda, or of the former Yugoslavia.

On Iran, I do not think that dossier is linked directly to the Israeli-Palestinian one. Palestinian and Israeli decision-makers should agree not to let the Iranian issue tear apart their bilateral discussions, and not to use the nuclear problem as an excuse to avoid staying on the path to peace. The local problem of Israeli-Palestinian conflict is distinct from the regional Iranian one.

Yet at the same time, Hamas is suffering from the erosion of support from Iran and Syria, due to the crisis inside Syria and Iran's economic difficulties with the sanctions. It suffers as well from the change of regime in Egypt. This Hamas loss of momentum is an opportunity allowing Mr. Abbas to make gains at its expense in Palestinian political life. Hamas is barely protesting against the peace process. But it will never change its ideology of rejecting Israel's existence.

On Peace and Internal Politics, on Both Sides: The Palestinian Authority, on two separate occasions, rejected a satisfactory compromise offer from Israel, most recently in 2008. That gives grounds to think that the Palestinian leaders may not want a permanent end to this conflict. Palestinian public opinion, however, accepts the necessity of a historic compromise. This was rejected twice; but perhaps the third time will be the proverbial charm.

We have a historical analogy: the peace between Israel and Egypt. This was for long considered a mere dream, impossible, absurd. But it has become a reality. And one should note that despite the Muslim Brothers, this peace has lasted. So in the long term, there is at least the possibility of peace between Palestinians and Israelis.

As for the Russian immigrants in Israel, I consider them to be pragmatists above all. They are not ideologues -- something they probably derive from their experience in the Soviet Union. What is most important to them is their standard of living. At the time of Yitzhak Rabin's election in 1992, they voted for peace. They are not monolithic supporters of Avigdor Lieberman, notwithstanding his own origins in the former Soviet Union. Rather, they are in many ways well assimilated into Israeli society as a whole.

On Settlements and Ground Realities: Concerning Israeli settlements and the security wall or barrier, I will give you a surprising answer: that wall is a clear and concrete sign that Israel does not want to keep the vast majority of the West Bank. The wall incorporates only around seven percent of West Bank land. It serves the interests of counter-terrorism. Just before its erection, there were one thousand Israeli victims of terrorism; ever since, hardly any. The wall supports peace as well: it is the proof that Israel does not wish to annex the West Bank. It could serve as the basis for the new border. Israelis and Palestinians are in agreement about a corresponding exchange of territory. Settlements are therefore not really a major problem. Most new construction is within the wall. Territorial swaps could solve 90 percent of these issues. Moreover, the Palestinians understand the essentially symbolic nature of new construction in the settlements.

On President Obama's Policies: Mr. Obama will deliver his State of the Union address later today. His priorities are internal ones. Military intervention in Syria is out of consideration. To be sure, we have all heard that "all options are on the table," but this is unrealistic. The president still supports a diplomatic solution to this conflict.

He has probably also learned another lesson from his first term: to make things move in the peace process, it takes pressure on both sides, not just on Israel. Israel is indeed the stronger party. But it is not only the stronger party that should offer openings for peace.

On Abbas, Netanyahu, and Rouhani: Mr. Mahmoud Abbas is not Arafat, and Mr. Benyamin Netanyahu is not Rabin. They are both pragmatists. For example, Mr. Netanyahu has decided that, in Israeli's own interests, for the sake of its Jewish and democratic nature, he needs to end the occupation. He has changed. But he has not yet fully decided whether or not Mr. Abbas is a genuine partner for peace.

As for Mr. Rouhani, he would like to see cooperation, resolution of the nuclear issue, an opening to the world ... but he does not have one good word for Israel. One never hears him say one peaceful word in that direction. On the contrary. He wants Iran to play a new role, but he cannot bring himself even to say the word "Israel." Yes, he is different from Mr. Ahmedinejad. That, however, is not enough. Privately, Israelis are pleased with Rouhani's election, yet it remains insufficiently positive. Among other things, at Davos, Mr. Netanyahu accepted the idea of a meeting with Mr. Rouhani; but the Iranians did not respond.

On Israeli democracy: Israeli institutions are complicated, to be sure, but Israel is a democracy. Nothing is simple in a democracy. Rather, everything is a long process. And by now the principle of a Palestinian state has been accepted, even on the right, even in Likud, even among the religious parties. Finally, there will be an Israeli referendum on any peace deal. If public opinion favors a compromise, that could resolve the relevant internal political problem in the country. ❖

Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defense, French Senate

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