

Israeli-Palestinian Talks Falter, But Modest Steps Still Possible

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Brief Analysis

The potential collapse of the latest negotiations should not stop the United States and its partners from pressing for further concessions from both sides.

The exploratory Israeli-Palestinian talks that began in Amman this month may soon end abruptly, paving the way for renewed political confrontation. Although the two sides are unlikely to reach a territorial compromise given the mistrust between Mahmoud Abbas and Binyamin Netanyahu, they still share several overlapping interests. Whether or not the United States and the international community succeed in keeping the talks going, the key is finding a way -- through one channel or another -- to capitalize on this common ground and formulate a realistic and mutually satisfactory package of steps for 2012.

Citing a September 23 statement by the Quartet for Middle East peace (i.e., the United States, EU, Russia, and the UN secretary-general), the Palestinians insisted that Israel produce a comprehensive proposal on territory and security by January 26, outlined in a map. Yesterday, Israel presented the basic principles of its position on borders but failed to provide a map or details on land swaps. The Palestinian Authority put forth its own map earlier this month.

Abbas has not commented directly on the PA's threats to walk out of the talks. Yet after his Wednesday meeting with Jordan's King Abdullah II, he stated, "After the end of the exploratory meetings there will be a phase of evaluations and consultations with His Majesty King Abdullah II, and we will have a meeting of the Arab League Follow-up Committee in Cairo on February 4." Indeed, Abbas seems to be deferring to the league, which may or may not support ongoing talks.

Last summer, the Quartet painstakingly sought to reach a substantive understanding on potential final-status talks using the principle of "a return to the 1967 borders plus land swaps" that President Obama had outlined in his May 19 and 22 speeches on the Middle East. U.S. diplomats conditioned this territorial position on the Quartet's acceptance of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. According to senior U.S. officials, the EU was willing to

accept this formula by summer's end, but Russia prevented a consensus for fear it would alienate the PA. The Quartet instead called on the two sides to hold unconditional talks aimed at putting forth final-status proposals on territory and security within ninety days from the date of preparatory talks.

Today, the negotiating teams are deadlocked over their interpretation of this statement. The Palestinians insist that the Quartet supports their demand for 1967 borders as a baseline, alluding to the group's backing of Obama's May speeches. Yet Israel understands that the Quartet consciously omitted the 1967 formula from its final proposal because it could not come to agreement on Washington's "nation state of the Jewish people" condition, as explained above.

Another point of contention is the ninety-day timetable. Israel argues that the clock did not begin ticking until the first date of direct negotiations, in which case the deadline is April 3. The Palestinians disagree, arguing that the timetable began when the Quartet first announced it on October 27. Both EU foreign policy coordinator Lady Catherine Ashton and State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland have avoided explicitly saying which interpretation is correct. Yet Nuland stated earlier this month that Washington did not want January 26 to "be a rigid sort of straitjacket"; the date was a simply a Quartet "proposal" illustrating "what we wanted to see happen."

If the timetable impasse is overcome, what is the next step for negotiators? For all their differences, Netanyahu and Abbas do have some overlapping interests. Neither wishes to see violence erupt in the West Bank, nor do they want failed negotiations to bolster Hamas. Moreover, Palestinian threats to resume their unilateral statehood campaign at the UN are somewhat empty, since the PA is unlikely to muster the nine Security Council votes needed to pass such a measure. For his part, Netanyahu has an interest in dispelling the perception that the peace process progresses only when Washington pressures Israel.

By emphasizing these interests and the danger of greater polarization, the United States and the international community could impress upon both sides the importance of at least modest progress in 2012. A nonterritorial proposal outlining steps to facilitate Palestinian state-building in the West Bank could go a long way in this regard. Such steps could include expanded Palestinian economic access in the West Bank, more Palestinian police stations outside urban areas, and further reduction of Israeli military patrols in urban areas. In exchange, the Palestinians would abandon their UN agenda and continue regular talks with Israel. With Washington's attention focused elsewhere (e.g., the presidential campaign season), such a package might be the best way of ensuring that the on-the-ground state-building progress of the past few years does not unravel and lead to needless confrontation.

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