

Differences Within Parties -- Not Just Between Them

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Do the latest Israeli-Palestinian talks in Amman represent a new opening or merely a tactical instrument for each side to perpetuate recriminations?

After 16 months of no negotiations, Israeli and Palestinian officials met in Amman last week and again this week. Yet, the question remains whether these talks represent a new opening or if they are merely a tactical instrument for each side to perpetuate recriminations?

If it is only about tactics, these talks will enable the Palestinians to rebut the Israeli claim regarding the Quartet's 90-day clock for both sides to present a map on borders and security because there are no direct meetings between Israel and the Palestinians. On the other hand, should the Palestinians walk away from the table, this will enable the Israelis to repeat what they have always said, namely that the Palestinians' refusal to stay at the negotiating table is the source of the impasse.

The idea of talks having only tactical value or something more meaningful depends on a deeper question. At the core, there are internal policy debates within both Israeli and Palestinian policy circles on the value of making any concessions to each other when each side is absolutely certain that no territorial breakthrough will occur during 2012. These quiet domestic debates occur within Palestinian and Israeli policy circles, and not just between them.

Whatever their differences, all sides have agreed upon two points: there will be no territorial breakthrough during an American election year, and the debates are for policymakers since the publics remain skeptical of the other side's sincerity for peace.

The debates have therefore shifted toward discussing measures that can be taken in the absence of a territorial breakthrough. On the Palestinian side, Prime Minister Salam Fayyad has publicly championed the idea that the best means of building a Palestinian state is to continue institution-building efforts on the ground in the West Bank that show steady progress towards this goal. Such measures range from increased Palestinian economic access in the West Bank, increasing Palestinian police stations outside of Palestinian urban areas to eliminating IDF incursions in

Area A, which Hamas has continuously cited as proof the occupation continues despite Palestinian security cooperation with Israel.

The other side of the Palestinian policy debate, associated with Abbas's foreign policy negotiating team, argues the best way to insulate the Palestinian Authority from the wrath of the Arab Awakening is through continued defiance of Israel. The school of thought believes it may be able to persuade PA President Mahmoud Abbas that his domestic popularity reached an all-time high following his bid for UN statehood in September, and this path of resistance will help to obscure his close association with the unpopular Hosni Mubarak. Moreover, this school will probably seek to persuade Abbas that diplomatic defiance of Israel will also help Fatah to compete with Hamas after it becomes clear that Fatah lacks a strong candidate for the May elections, especially given the political boost that Hamas may get from the current Islamist electoral wave in the Arab world.

Furthermore, this school is seen as viewing Palestinian defiance as virtually cost-free internationally. The popular unaccommodating image of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu makes him an easy target, and both the Europeans and Arabs often assume that he is therefore the cause of any impasse.

On the Israeli side, the policy debate in 2012 will center on whether there is any value in yielding to Palestinian demands on non-territorial issues if a full peace deal is out of reach. Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman identifies strongly with this view.

A contrasting view comes from key parts of the Israeli defense establishment, which views the threat of a nuclear Iran as strong motivation for credible progress between Israel and the Palestinians. Three points make up this line of reasoning: first, that progress between Israel and the Palestinians could eventually lead to negotiations that would help to insulate the PA against any Arab Awakening revolts. Second, progress on the peace process front could allow Israel to focus more of its policymaking efforts on combating the Iran nuclear threat. Third, progress with the Palestinians could only benefit Israel as it seeks to reach out to various regional Arabs on the Iranian issue, and as it seeks to salvage its relationship with the Egyptian military -- seen by Israel as key to preserving the bilateral peace treaty.

One might add a fourth reason as well. Any progress by Netanyahu in 2012 would serve to counter the prevalent notion that only US pressure can spur Israeli steps towards peace. Paralysis in 2012 would only strengthen this argument, which is certainly not in Netanyahu's interest.

Some ministers and officials close to Netanyahu suggest Israel could accept progress on the ground if the Palestinians provide a quid pro quo. In other words, only if the Palestinians suspend their diplomatic efforts at the UN and other international agencies will they win any reciprocal Israeli action. It is this tradeoff that could pit the different sides of the Palestinian debate: those favoring progress on the ground versus those who want to wage a diplomatic defiant approach against Israel at the UN and elsewhere.

The current concern for the peace process is not what will or will not happen this week in Amman, but rather how policy debates in Jerusalem and Ramallah will shape a year of zero expectations. On the more optimistic note, when there are no expectations, they can be easily exceeded. On the less hopeful note, zero expectations, however, does not mean zero consequences. Given the current turmoil in the region, 2012 could be a very consequential year.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute. ❖

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