

What Would Netanyahu Do for Peace?

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May 17, 2011

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Washington cannot easily demand that Netanyahu make major concessions on peace as Abbas joins forces with a group sworn to Israel's destruction, but the Israeli prime minister should still arrive in Washington this week with a plan for renewed talks.

Just a few weeks ago, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's upcoming visit to Washington had the makings of a confrontation amid U.S. dissatisfaction over peace policy. Then Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas signed a power-sharing arrangement with Hamas. Although Washington cannot easily demand that Netanyahu make major concessions on peace as Abbas joins forces with a group sworn to Israel's destruction, the Israeli prime minister should still arrive this week with a plan for renewed peace talks.

Concerns about the Palestinian unity government are understandable. The Abbas-Hamas deal jeopardizes important gains in the West Bank of the past four years: the exemplary economic stewardship of Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, who oversaw 9 percent annual growth at a time of global economic recession; and the security cooperation between Israel and the PA, which has led to an unprecedented calm after several years of bloody violence.

Israel's reaction to the Hamas-Fatah pact has been to hunker down, hoping that the unity government will collapse under the weight of the parties' differences. Yet paralysis carries its own risks. The U.S. partners in "the Quartet" -- the European Union, Russia and the United Nations, which joined Washington in 2006 to lay out steps by which Hamas must reform should it want to become a legitimate interlocutor in the peace process -- have cautiously welcomed the new government with hopes, as opposed to demands, that Hamas will evolve, though some have championed the fact that cabinet ministers in the new body are affiliated with neither Hamas nor Fatah. A majority of countries is likely to recognize a Palestinian state at the U.N. General Assembly this September.

This should be of serious concern to Netanyahu, who needs to overcome suspicions about his desire for a breakthrough. Rather than slide to September, Netanyahu should take the opportunity of his May 24 address to a joint session of Congress to lay out a compelling political vision toward renewed peace talks. He could state that if -- and only if -- Abbas cuts ties with Hamas, Israeli and Palestinian leaders could cross historic thresholds meaningful to both sides.

Polls show that the majority of Israelis and Palestinians want a two-state solution but remain uncertain of whether the other side is willing to make the necessary concessions. Both Netanyahu and Abbas need to address the other side's gut fears. And the only chance of one side crossing a threshold is if the other side takes a comparable step.

In theory, the United States should have engineered and synchronized this crossing of thresholds. It has, however, been preoccupied with the Arab Spring and has not focused on this issue, perhaps precipitating former senator George Mitchell's departure as envoy. The new Palestinian configuration further hamstringing our position. A speech by President Obama this Thursday, focusing on the Mideast writ large, with a possible mention of U.S. principles to end the conflict, is far less preferable than substantive leadership by Netanyahu and Abbas; it would be perceived in the region as exhortation without follow-through.

So it is up to both parties to act. Netanyahu should spell out to Congress the major threshold he will cross, but only if Abbas is willing to respond publicly in kind. Since Palestinians' major fear is that Israel will hold on to the West Bank, Netanyahu needs to clearly state that this will not be the case. Although Palestinians realize that Israel will not return to the pre-1967 borders and that enforced security arrangements are vital for any agreement, they want assurance that the 1967 line will be the baseline for calculations in configuring the final border. Thus, whatever land Israel keeps from within the West Bank -- which is likely to be adjacent to the old pre-1967 boundary, where a significant majority of the settlers live -- will yield an equivalent amount from within Israel proper. Such a deal is in line with Israeli offers to every other Arab state on its borders; a statement to this effect will go far in assuring Palestinians that Netanyahu is serious about peace.

The historic threshold that Israelis want Abbas to cross is acceptance of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people, with equal rights for all its citizens. Netanyahu noted in a June 2009 speech that this would address Israel's key fear that Palestinians will never accept the legitimacy of a Jewish state in the Middle East, regardless of the extent of Israeli territorial concessions.

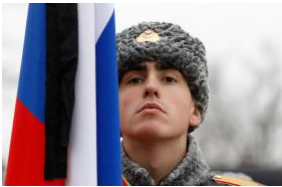
Of course, mutual recognition must be accompanied by a vigorous public peace education campaign, with both sides making clear that each has a historic attachment to the land and that the land must be shared.

These declarations alone are unlikely to solve all the problems, but making them would be an important step toward jump-starting a process that has completely stalled and could easily deteriorate. If they choose to maintain the status quo, Abbas and Netanyahu can win politically for now, but in the long run both peoples will lose. There is no substitute for a clearly articulated political vision from both leaders.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of the [Project on the Middle East Peace Process \(/templateI02.php?SID=16&newActiveSubNav=Project%20on%20the%20Middle%20East%20Peace%20Process&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D16&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](#) at The Washington Institute. ♦

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