

## Off the Table

Sep 2, 2010



Articles & Testimony

**W**hile packaged as a triumph, the rollout of a new round of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations is in fact more of a relief, given the circuitous path required to arrive at the talks. Convinced of the need for a U.S. role that was at once more activist and yet more dispassionate, President Barack Obama's administration committed a series of early diplomatic miscues that strained U.S. relations with both Israelis and Palestinians, and likely delayed the onset of direct negotiations. The legacy of those early errors -- the Sept. 26 expiration (or perhaps extension) of Israel's settlement moratorium -- continues to hang as a dark cloud over the fledgling peace process.

In light of the experience of the last 18 months, therefore, it is prudent to use the commencement of "direct talks" not only to revisit the negotiating issues themselves, but also to reassess the U.S. role in the negotiations.

The notion of the United States as a mediator or "honest broker" in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process conjures up images such as those from the Camp David summit in 2000 -- U.S. negotiators sitting alongside Israeli and Palestinian counterparts, sleeves rolled up and poring over draft agreements, cups of coffee close at hand. More frequently, however, serious Israeli-Palestinian negotiations have taken place without Americans or any other mediators in the room. This was the case for much of the Oslo process in the 1990s, as well as during the talks that followed the Annapolis conference in 2007, which were launched under U.S. auspices but conducted largely bilaterally between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

That Israelis and Palestinians can manage to negotiate with one another without American participation should not be surprising -- by this point, the majority of both Israelis and Palestinians (between 55 and 62 percent of Palestinians, according to recent polls) believe in the necessity of a negotiated agreement, and successive Israeli and Palestinian leaders alike have engaged in one form of talks or another. Both are, to varying extents, judged domestically and internationally on their ability to conduct a credible peace process.

However, though direct talks are necessary to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they are not sufficient. Negotiations are not just about what happens at the table, but also what occurs away from the table. Neglect of "away from the table" issues -- getting the context and the process right -- will sink a negotiation, but the failure will be blamed on the more visible manifestation of the negotiations, the "at the table" talks. The result is a cynicism regarding peace talks that is evident today among both Israelis and Palestinians.

In these specific negotiations -- given the veritable library of peace plans and ideas for compromise on the core issues that negotiators will have to draw upon -- what happens away from the table might arguably be more important than the "at the table" talks. Although the United States will surely have some role to play during the negotiations themselves -- whether offering bridging proposals, serving as a sounding board or scapegoat, or otherwise stepping in to aid or pressure the negotiators -- it is away from the table where Washington can make the biggest difference.

There are a number of steps that Washington can take away from the negotiating table to boost the talks' prospects for success. One vital factor contributing to their success will be the domestic positions of Israeli Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who to some extent have staked their political fortunes on the negotiations and will be vulnerable to criticism at home. The United States can bolster both men through steps to strengthen their hands domestically and by avoiding actions that risk weakening them. With respect to Israel, for example, Washington should deepen cooperation with the country on regional security challenges to avoid the impression that these have been subordinated to the peace talks. U.S.-Israel disagreements such as those that erupted last year over settlements should first be addressed through quiet diplomacy rather than public recriminations.

With respect to the Palestinians, the United States can strengthen Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad through direct budgetary support and by studiously avoiding any outreach to Hamas, which rejects Abbas's authority and violently opposes the peace process.

By focusing its efforts away from the table, Washington can also cultivate a positive feedback loop supporting the negotiations among Israelis and Palestinians. To the extent both populations see positive results flowing from the talks, support for the negotiations will increase and they will in turn have a greater chance of success. To this end, serious efforts in parallel with the negotiations are required to promote enhanced security and the consistent delivery of services in the West Bank, Palestinian economic development, and the cessation of incitement against Israel.

In support of these efforts, the United States will need to rally the support of other states in the Middle East, Europe, and elsewhere. Regional leaders in particular have the power to bolster the talks -- by funding the Palestinian Authority; formally considering how to integrate a future Palestinian state into the regional economic and security framework; acting against Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other terrorist groups; and reaching out meaningfully to Israel. Arab states can also hinder the process -- for example, by attempting to dictate negotiating positions to the Palestinians or enjoining actions against Israel in international forums.

Finally, the Obama administration will need to develop a strategy to deal with the efforts of rejectionists such as Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah, none of which will be persuaded by any amount of diplomatic spadework to accept a negotiated settlement. The United States must work to isolate these spoilers diplomatically and deprive them of the funding and provisioning they require. Most importantly, the United States must thwart Iran's nuclear ambitions, which command the attention of both Israeli and Arab leaders and which, if successful, would likely bury any peace negotiations.

What truly makes the United States an "honest broker" in these negotiations is not equidistance between the two sides, but intimate friendship with both; not indifference to the talks' outcome, but a passionate belief in the two-state solution and a willingness and ability to deploy American influence to see it achieved. While U.S. officials may or may not have the next brilliant idea on borders or Jerusalem, the United States is uniquely positioned to accomplish the patient "away from the table" work that may ultimately determine the success or failure of the negotiations.

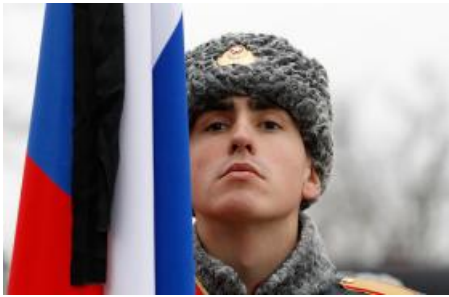
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