

The Peace Talks Resume: Prospects for Success

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Brief Analysis

On August 31, 2010, Robert Danin, Ghaith al-Omari, Abdel Monem Said Aly, and David Makovsky addressed a special Policy Forum at The Washington Institute to discuss direct talks between Israelis and Palestinians. Dr. Danin, the Eni Enrico Mattei senior fellow for Middle East and Africa Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, previously directed the Jerusalem mission of Quartet envoy Tony Blair. Mr. al-Omari is advocacy director of the American Task Force on Palestine and a former foreign policy advisor to Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas. Dr. Said Aly is chairman of the board of the al-Ahram Foundation and director of the al-Ahram Center for Strategic and Political Studies in Cairo. Mr. Makovsky, Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Institute and director of its [Project on the Middle East Peace Process \(/templateI02.php?SID=16&newActiveSubNav=Project%20on%20the%20Middle%20East%20Peace%20Process&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D16&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](/templateI02.php?SID=16&newActiveSubNav=Project%20on%20the%20Middle%20East%20Peace%20Process&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D16&newActiveNav=researchPrograms), just returned from a six-week research trip to Israel and the West Bank. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Robert Danin

President Obama is convening Middle Eastern leaders in Washington this week because he feels a sense of urgency to relaunch the peace process. Although both Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu and President Abbas have said and done things that show their commitment to peace, they do not necessarily share Obama's urgency -- Abbas needs a deal but is fearful of negotiations, while Netanyahu wants negotiations but questions whether the concessions involved in a deal would carry undue risk.

That each leader is operating within a different frame of reference is obvious: Netanyahu is coming to the table in response to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's invitation, while Abbas has publicly responded only to the August 20 Quartet statement supporting renewed negotiations. Moreover, both parties are plagued by a fundamental lack of trust, with each expressing doubts about having a partner on the other side.

Despite these setbacks, there is reason to be hopeful. Polls show that most Israelis and Palestinians share the same ultimate goal: to live side-by-side in two states, peacefully and securely. The latest Hamas terrorist attack notwithstanding, security forces on both sides are cooperating closely, transforming even the most dangerous cities of Hebron and Jenin into reasonably safe areas.

If the parties are to overcome their mistrust, efforts must extend beyond the negotiating room. The currently cynical publics must be conditioned to believe that Israeli withdrawal from the Palestinian territories will be reciprocated with enhanced security. Only by altering the peoples' perception of the process will Abbas and Netanyahu obtain the support needed for negotiations to succeed.

Ghaith al-Omari

Although both sides have an interest in successful negotiations, each is entering talks with a host of concerns. Domestic politics are at the top of the list -- Abbas and Netanyahu each have hardliner factions to deal with at home, so neither leader really knows where the other will draw his bottom line. Consequently, the initial negotiations will likely be characterized by posturing and probing, cautious behavior, and attempts to gain some marginal advantage before substantive talks truly commence. The U.S. role, in turn, will be to nudge the parties into revealing the margins within which they are willing to operate.

To increase the prospects for success, Washington should define a "code of conduct" governing the parties' behavior outside the negotiating room. A channel for talks must remain open even if crises erupt, and developing a system of "positive messaging" (or at least avoiding "negative messaging") is critical. The parties must also agree to prevent disruptive leaks.

Progress on the ground is equally important, as it is the only way to alleviate public frustration associated with the essential secrecy of negotiations. Palestinians must deepen their progress on the security front, while Israel should encourage Palestinian freedom of movement. In addition, Abbas and Netanyahu should use September 26 -- the day the Israeli settlement moratorium is due to expire -- as an opportunity to show their publics that compromises must be made. At the end of the day, there is reason to be cautiously optimistic.

Abdel Monem Said Aly

The agony of the Arab-Israeli conflict is the tendency of each side to mix history with strategy. Whereas strategy is based on measurable, man-made goals, a host of unforeseeable forces can complicate peacemaking when historical grievances and perceptions are permitted to unduly influence the process. Obama's challenge is to shift the conflict's existential nature into manageable issues. Those adopting this strategic approach to peacemaking can draw from the experience of Jordan and Egypt's treaties with Israel, both of which included compromises that Amman and Cairo did not view as ideal but nevertheless continue to honor today.

Whereas the Bush administration viewed the conflict as unsolvable, the Obama administration believes that resolving it is important for American national interests. Similarly, once Israel and the Palestinians define the conflict around the strategic concept of national interests, they will be able to lay out their national goals as a foundation for compromise.

For example, the core issues of Palestinian refugees and Israel's Jewish character can be moved from the realm of history to strategy. Viewing refugees as people rather than totems is key -- displaced people have been justly dealt with in past conflicts, and these examples can help the parties deal with refugees in their conflict as well.

As for Israel's Jewish character, it can be simplified into a matter of legal self-definition for the purposes of negotiations: if Israel constitutionally defines itself as "Jewish state," then any country that chooses to recognize Israel will consequently recognize its Jewish character as well. "Acceptance" is a matter of the heart and must be won, but "recognition" is well defined in international law. By limiting the discourse to recognition rather than acceptance, the parties can move an historical issue to the realm of strategy. To facilitate this transition, the border issue must come first in the new negotiations -- once the lines are drawn, the parties can tackle tougher issues such as the future of Israeli settlements.

In forecasting the prospects for success, one should not underestimate the accumulated record of past negotiations, the Arab League's support for the new talks, and the fact that Israeli and

Arab interests are increasingly merging in that both worry about the Iranian nuclear threat. At the same time, the cost of failure is exceptionally high: failed negotiations could even lead to war under certain conditions.

David Makovsky

Despite the skepticism surrounding direct negotiations, the situation on the ground allows room for optimism. Security cooperation between Israelis and the Palestinian Authority is unprecedented, economic growth in the West Bank is at 11 percent despite a worldwide recession, and institution building under Prime Minister Salam Fayad's leadership has never been stronger.

A number of U.S. policy changes offer additional cause for hope. Netanyahu's July 6 meeting with Obama marked a turning point in their relations. For the first time, Obama vouched for the prime minister's sincerity on peace, leading many to believe that Netanyahu shared the concessions he is willing to make for peace. Obama is also credited with pressuring the Arab League into supporting his call for direct talks on July 29. Even U.S. policy shifts on Iran have played a role -- the White House no longer views progress on the Arab-Israeli front as a prerequisite for halting Iran's nuclear program, but rather sees it as important to the regional ambiance after already assuming a more assertive stance toward Tehran.

In Israel, Netanyahu's decision to lead direct negotiations himself illustrates his seriousness about the process. And his subtle policy shifts -- such as calling for the continued presence, but not sovereignty, of Israeli forces in the Jordan Valley -- should not be taken lightly. For his part, Abbas has not hesitated to discuss the possibility of land swaps and the benefits of end of conflict, end of claim with Israel.

To improve chances of success, the negotiators should focus on borders and security -- where differences are, in principle, quite bridgeable -- while conditioning the public to accept agreements on the more difficult issues of Jerusalem and refugees. As the talks progress, both parties can mitigate widespread cynicism by working toward synchronized public messaging that emphasizes the other side's progress. Meanwhile, Arab nations should reciprocate Israeli concessions with gradual but substantive measures signaling that the Arab League's peace plan has real content.

Of course, both Netanyahu and Abbas are operating within a domestic context. Netanyahu fears a repeat of the 1998 Wye River talks, in which he lost the Israeli right and, in the end, his government when it could not be reconfigured. And Abbas fears sabotage by an Iran-backed Hamas. On balance, then, the current atmosphere of cautious optimism is tempered by numerous and dangerous wild cards.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Sheli Chabon. ❖

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