

Mideast Peace Talks To Look Forward To?

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The announcement Friday that Middle East peace talks would be launched Sept. 2 was not exactly met with an outpouring of enthusiasm. Yet progress on security and other issues suggests there is reason to believe peace talks can produce results.

There has been a surge in cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) ever since Hamas ousted security officials and the mainstream Fatah Party from Gaza more than three years ago. I recently spent five weeks in the region, where I met with more than four dozen Israeli and Palestinian officials, including President Mahmoud Abbas. Cooperation is increasingly evident in several areas.

Security cooperation between the PA and Israel has substantially improved. In 2002, 410 Israelis were killed by suicide bombings and other attacks emanating from the West Bank; in the past three years, Israel has suffered one fatality from one such attack. Speaking in Washington this year, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak said the situation on the ground "is better than any time in the past." Israeli charges that the Palestinians have a "revolving door" approach of releasing terrorists after quick arrests -- rampant during the Arafat era -- are no longer heard. A Palestinian nonviolent protest movement has been born.

For its part, the PA no longer attempts to hide its daily security cooperation with Israel. In recent months, the PA even hosted Israeli senior security officials in Jenin, Tulkaram and Jericho. During the Gaza conflict of 2008-09, the PA kept the West Bank calm. Because of the improved security, Israel has reduced the number of major manned checkpoints in the West Bank from 42 in 2008 to 14. The checkpoints that remain include more passage lanes, resulting in substantially reduced wait times. And the improved security and other efforts by reformist Prime Minister Salam Fayyad have resulted in a West Bank economic growth rate of 8.5 percent.

Religious and education reforms have started, including a major effort to identify those imams who agitate for suicide bombings. PA Religion Minister Mahmoud Habbash told me, and Israeli security officials confirm, that such imams have been removed from all Palestinian mosques under PA jurisdiction. "Hamas has been running our mosques for 30 years, and we are trying to take the mosques back so they are used only for prayer," Habbash told me.

The PA has begun reshaping the curriculum of Palestinian institutions that accredit imams, and screening is also being conducted to weed out schoolteachers who support Hamas radicalism. PA security officials say 1,100 of the 28,000 Palestinian teachers in the West Bank have been replaced. Incitement would be further reduced if, among other things, the practice of naming town squares and camps after the killers of yesteryear ended.

The Israelis have also demonstrated change. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu publicly endorsed a two-state solution last summer, and his 10-month moratorium on settlement activity in the West Bank has demonstrated more restraint than any of his predecessors. It is unclear whether the moratorium, scheduled to expire next month, will be extended -- a question that could derail the nascent effort. And whereas former prime minister Ariel Sharon sought to retain control over large chunks of the West Bank, to prevent attacks from the east, Israeli officials suggest that Netanyahu is far more concerned with effective security measures around the West Bank border, to prevent the sort of smuggling that exists from Egypt to Gaza, than with annexing land.

Negotiators want to begin peace talks with the issues of security and borders, as each side knows well what the other side wants. Even differences over territory are unlikely to be insurmountable. The last time the parties tried to hold quiet talks, in 2008, they differed over just 4 percent of the West Bank. Abbas has said he knows that Israel will keep West Bank settlements adjacent to Israeli cities, and Israel is likely to provide the Palestinians an offsetting amount of land within the Israeli border.

There are two issues that are not about quiet policy shifts but will require conditioning of the populations: Jerusalem and refugees -- the narrative issues of the conflict that cut to the self-definition of the parties. The difficulties surrounding these issues have led some to question Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's call to complete the talks in one year. But the hope is that progress on security and borders will facilitate political traction on these thornier topics.

If, however, that does not happen, the parties need to find ways to grapple with these final issues in a manner that does not cause other progress to unravel.

Are there risks to talks? Of course. Abbas told me that Iran gives Hamas \$500 million a year, and it is likely that Tehran will try to upend negotiations.

Yet inaction also poses risks. Fayyad's efforts at Palestinian institution-building and security cooperation are succeeding because they are packaged as part of the effort to build a state. A bottom-up push focused on security and economic institutions will not be sustainable unless it is joined by a top-down effort.

David Makovsky is a distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, where he directs the [Project on the Middle East Peace Process](#).

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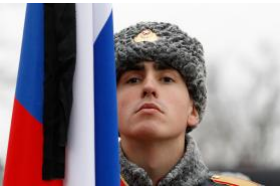
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. He coauthored, with Dennis Ross, [Myths, Illusions, and Peace: Finding a New Direction for America in the Middle East](#). (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?>

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