

A Second Camp David Summit?

Assessment and Prospects

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Brief Analysis

A decision whether to revive the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks at a reconvened Camp David Summit may be made next Wednesday, but as it stands now, the prospects seem very uncertain. President Bill Clinton is scheduled to hold separate meetings with Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority chairman Yasir Arafat during the United Nations special Millennium Summit. Mindful of an array of ticking clocks, Washington would like to reconvene Camp David for a short and final session sometime during the second half of September. Yet, given the failure of the last summit in July, a generally recognized precondition for a revival of summitry is the prior resolution of almost all outstanding issues between the parties, in order to virtually guarantee the success of renewed negotiations.

Behind the Timetable The U.S. timetable is driven by a variety of forces. Chief among them is the fear that Barak may be toppled when the Knesset returns from parliamentary recess on October 29. He currently enjoys support of only 42 of 120 members of Knesset and his announcement of a "secular revolution" has solidified a wall-to-wall opposition among the key swing voters of Shas.

For U.S. officials, Barak's uncertain ability to survive a Knesset challenge will have a heavy bearing on their decision to reconvene a summit, but there are other factors involved. The short time left in Clinton's presidency, combined with the fact that the president's negotiating stature will diminish with the election of a successor in November, make September a pivotal month for the administration. Also, achieving a breakthrough in September presents an opportunity to gain a preliminary blessing from Congress for any peace deal--and its ancillary financial commitments--before its pre-election adjournment. Finally, October is the month of Jewish holidays, which would most likely prohibit Barak from attending a negotiating summit. Given this narrow window of opportunity, Clinton was correct in dispatching a senior US diplomat to the region prior to his stop-over in Cairo, and wise to hold consultations this week with Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. Unfortunately, a diplomatic dispatch to Cairo was not scheduled before the last Camp David summit. Mubarak is one of the only people who can sway Arafat, and the Palestinian leader has insisted that he cannot act on Jerusalem without Arab consent.

Arafat's Brinkmanship? The joint U.S.-Israeli desire for a speedy resumption of talks and perhaps an even quicker

resolution has its negative consequences. Indeed, it is precisely the sense that Clinton and Barak both want an early summit and a quick deal that permits Arafat to act as if he alone among the three is not in a hurry. Perhaps, he is convinced Israel will make further concessions, or that the concessions Israel made at Camp David are not, as Barak said at the time, "null and void." To be sure, Arafat seems to be correct about the latter, evidenced by the new Israeli effort--led by acting foreign minister Shlomo Ben-Ami--to codify the achievements of Camp David and not consign them to history. So far, however, Arafat has not authorized his aides to pursue this effort at codification. In fact, there have not been any high-level talks, nor are any underway, to seek bridging formulas necessary to give Clinton enough confidence to proceed with a revived summit. Instead, there seem to be only desultory conversations between mid-level officials.

Since Camp David, Arafat has basked in heightened approval ratings. According to the Ramallah-based Center for Policy and Survey Research, Arafat has a 68% approval rating among Palestinians. This is a major boost from where the chairman stood before Camp David, when support for his policies dipped well below the 50% mark. Barak suffered the opposite fate. Camp David dealt a major blow to the Israeli leader, and according to a Dahaf poll, 64% of the Israeli electorate now says he is not a good prime minister. Notwithstanding Barak's tumbling approval ratings, the Palestinian leader has evinced no concern that Barak will fall or that Barak's defeat--and the possible return to power of the Likud--constitutes a loss for the Palestinians. Since Camp David, he has said little about the great achievements Palestinians made in negotiations--the fact that, for example, parts of Jerusalem, not Abu Dis, are now within their sights--and instead has underscored a series of uncompromising demands. Most notably, he delivered an unusually tough speech at this week's meeting of the Jerusalem Committee of the Organization of the Islamic Conference in Morocco. He said Palestinian participation in Camp David should not be misconstrued: "Any settlement which does not guarantee its (Jerusalem's) return to Arab and Palestinian sovereignty and its liberation and the liberation of its people from occupation is doomed to fail and will not last."

Everything considered, it remains unclear whether these tactics are classic Arafat brinkmanship--a technique which he has used with great success in the past--or whether it constitutes something deeper, namely an unwillingness to compromise or, even worse, an unwillingness to face the prospect of certifying the final "end" of the conflict with Israel. The fact that a "final status" agreement will, unlike interim accords, require Arafat to concede claims--not just defer them--combined with the fact that Palestinian officials and media have said virtually nothing about the idea of ending the conflict bodes poorly for the prospect of reaching the finish line either easily or speedily. In fact, these disquieting signs indicate that completing an agreement, a final agreement, will prove more difficult and perhaps more elusive than all prior agreements. While Arafat surely showed some flexibility on several key issues at Camp David, especially concerning settlement blocs, it was he who chose to turn down Clinton's offer to negotiate--not even conclude, but to explore--potential options in Jerusalem. His demand for full Palestinian sovereignty in East Jerusalem--excluding the Western Wall and Jewish Quarter--was and remains, at least publicly, immovable.

Issues on the Table Today, most public attention is focused on defining the future of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, both in terms of sovereignty and day to day functioning. One idea that seems to have gained currency is the notion of "divine sovereignty" over the plateau, which would effectively give the parties the ability to concretize the existing status quo or develop alternative functional arrangements and sidestep the minefield of political sovereignty. This is an idea that has won cautious support from some Palestinians and, surprisingly enough, nationalist Likud Mayor Ehud Olmert. Egypt reportedly also favors sidestepping--at least in the immediate future--the sovereignty issues. Another idea that has been flouted, ostensibly by the U.S. team, is to divide the area into four regions, giving each of the parties full sovereignty in part (the Wall and the Mosques respectively) and different roles elsewhere (Israeli preeminence in the underground tunnels; Palestinian preeminence on the above-ground plateau). However, even if the Temple Mount issue is resolved--and there are no signs that these ideas are acceptable to the

parties themselves--there are many other unresolved issues left over from Camp David. In Jerusalem, for example, the Palestinians believe the entire Old City--with the exception of the Jewish Quarter and "safe access" to the Western Wall--should be theirs, as should all Arab neighborhoods. Barak rejects this position but has offered them municipal autonomy instead. Should Camp David reconvene, the Palestinians will likely press for control of Arab neighborhoods and full sovereignty therein. The Palestinian position was and remains to partition control of the city, even though they will insist that dual sovereignties can co-exist in an undivided "open" city. Israelis are deeply skeptical about this, partly as a result of the current security needs and partly from memories of the last partition of Jerusalem in 1949, when Israelis were not only refused access to their holy sites, but some sites were desecrated as well.

While there are many differences between the two sides on Jerusalem, the Israelis and Palestinians seem united in a belief that Jerusalem should not be deferred in these negotiations. Arafat feels that deferring Jerusalem will be interpreted in the Arab world as neglect, while for Israel, deferring Jerusalem will be seen as perpetuating the conflict rather than bringing it to an end.

Of course, Jerusalem is not the only unresolved issue. Contrary to media reports, differences between the parties on other topics, such as territory and refugees, remain sizable. Barak has advanced the idea of conceding 88 percent of the West Bank, including eventually reverting the Jordan Valley territory to Palestinian control. However, the Palestinians still have the figure of 94 percent in mind. On the issue of refugees, the two sides may have agreed to unrestricted entry of Palestinian refugees to the future state of Palestine, but they remain divided on the number of refugees permitted to enter Israel.

Some believe that a deal is doable and can be achieved soon. Israeli justice minister Yossi Beilin, for example, believes Israel and the Palestinians are involved in the "last kilometer" of the Arab-Israel conflict. Yet formidable hurdles remain. Whether the runners can sprint across the finish line before the clock runs out on the Clinton Administration--indeed, whether the last month's efforts to change the calculus by which Arafat rejected an unprecedented Israeli offer at Camp David in July--will become clearer with the outcome of the President's talks in New York this week.

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