Israeli Politics and Camp David

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Brief Analysis

Domestic political considerations will be an important factor in Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak's moves at Camp David. Although he would like to have one for a myriad of reasons, politically Barak does not need a deal. To the contrary, failure to reach an agreement could even bring his "big tent" coalition back from dead. Barak had hoped to have a broad government that included the religious parties behind him, having learned from the Yitzhak Rabin era that it was a mistake to have a narrow government relying on its Arab members to squeeze through Knesset confidence votes. But having lost the Jewish majority before his departure, the prime minister's critics will insist that the results of the Camp David summit are illegitimate. Undoubtedly, Barak will reject such assertions, pointing to his promise to hold a national referendum.

Indeed, Barak currently presides over a minority government. There are forty-two Knesset members in the coalition, including the ten from Meretz, a party not formally in the government. Barak will have to rely on cobbling together a majority by securing the votes of the wavering members of several smaller parties, while not losing any of the votes of coalition members. This would permit him to come close to--or maybe even attain--half of the Knesset's support.

The Knesset Hurdles If Camp David results in an agreement, Barak will have his work carved out for him as he sells it to the Israeli public. The prime minister wants to take the unprecedented step of holding a referendum, but he will still need the support from the Knesset because there is no law specifying a referendum procedure. The opposition in the Knesset has been pushing for a supermajority vote in the referendum, that is, a requirement that the majority of registered voters (not just of those voting) vote yes in order for the referendum to pass. If the supermajority is imposed, it could require up to 60 percent of the popular vote; therefore, to avert this prospect, Barak will have to fight for every vote in the Knesset in order to block the opposition move. His best hope is to find a sufficient number of disaffected opposition Knesset members to pass a referendum law that allows for a simple majority. Alternatively, the complex nature of the Knesset situation could easily force Barak to do what until now he has been loathe to do: call new elections.

And there is another Knesset hurdle. If a Camp David agreement includes any concessions on Israel's sovereign territory--either on part of Jerusalem or within the context of other land swaps--Barak will need sixty-one votes in the Knesset for approval, that is, he must have a supermajority of the Knesset (a majority of all members, not just of the members voting). That will be tough to secure.

Barak's work could have been much easier in the absence of some mistakes he has made while in office. For one thing, Barak has been seen as a person who does not consult with others when he makes decisions. Such an attitude has created tension among the coalition partners who feel left out of the decisionmaking process; relatedly, there is no sense of partnership within the coalition. To be fair, Barak's behavior can in part be attributed to his fear of leaks, an occupational hazard in Israel.

Another of the prime minister's mistakes was the appointment of Yossi Sarid as the education minister, a red flag to the religious community on cultural issues. Although Barak has been very successful in subordinating everything to peace, he failed in this instance.

From Barak's perspective, is debatable whether or not he should have gone for a unity government with Likud directly after the elections last year. Likud was badly defeated, and its leader, Ariel Sharon, was desperate to get back into the government. In contrast, Likud now feels revitalized and is vigorously opposing the government. But Barak felt that if he were to cut deals with Palestinian Authority chairman Yasir Arafat on the Jordan Valley or on autonomy in Jerusalem, Likud would oppose him. Therefore, he chose not to include the party in the big tent coalition.

What to Expect from the Summit Barak will be aiming at an ambitious outcome. A partial agreement would be seen as yet another concession with no gain for Israel, and it would be harder to get public support for this kind of deal; a Palestinian renunciation of all claims and an agreement to end the conflict would be crucial for Barak to sell.

Barak believes the time is ripe for settling the conflict. He wanted the summit when Clinton was still around, and furthermore, he believes that Arafat is the only Palestinian leader that could make such a historic concession for a historic peace--although until now, the chairman's "concessions" have been about defining issues rather than conceding them. Arafat's role is pivotal to the peace process, and his age is certainly a concern for Barak. Of course, Barak also views himself as a historic figure that could bring peace to Israel, even if it meant sacrificing his term in office.

Tactics Barak has a few strategies in his arsenal to use at the summit, but only if forced to do so. He could employ an "Arafatesque" approach, by which his weaknesses are put forward as a reason why the other side should agree to a deal. Indeed, Arafat himself may attempt to use this strategy again at Camp David, leading to a situation in which both sides pursue the same tack simultaneously. Barak could also use a "Geneva Defense" strategy, a reference to President Bill Clinton's Geneva meeting earlier this year with Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad. That is, Barak can make a generous offer knowing that if Arafat refuses (as did Asad), the onus would be on the Palestinian leader to explain why the talks failed. Barak could then go back home without a deal and say that he refused to make concessions that would hurt the interests of Israel.

Chemistry The role of Clinton will be pivotal during the summit. In the first Camp David talks between Israeli prime minister Menahem Begin and Egyptian leader Anwar Sadat, the parties would only agree to concessions when they met one-on-one with President Jimmy Carter, not when they faced each other. Clinton could do the same and, in addition, lay out a possible doomsday scenario to the parties if some sort of an agreement is not reached. Nevertheless, the chemistry between Arafat and Barak is poor, unlike that between Arafat and Shimon Peres and the one that partially existed between Arafat and Rabin. This lack of good chemistry may make an agreement even more difficult to reach.

Issues One way to try to bridge differences would be to focus on "monetizing" issues like the refugee problem. However, it should be kept in mind that on matters requiring U.S. funding, Barak will need the consent of a Congress that may not be able to vote until after the fall elections--this, in addition to the fact that he might have to face a referendum at home. Such uncertainty might help the prime minister during the summit but could hurt him afterward.

Barak, unlike Rabin, has played the settlement issue rather well, another subject that will likely come up during the summit. According to his plan, 80 percent of the settlers (145,000 out of 180,000) would remain inside Israel, primarily via the annexation of three major settlement blocs: the area east of Tel Aviv around Ariel (31,000 residents), the area near Jerusalem around Maaleh Adumim (25,000 residents), and the Gush Etzion area south of Jerusalem (50,000 residents). On the other hand, Barak will face the challenge of resolving the future of two additional settlement blocs: the Beth El-Ofra area near Ramallah (6,000 residents) and the Kiryat Arba area near Hebron (6,000 residents), the latter being the most ideological of all the settlements.

Overall, it seems Barak is heading toward an agreement that would require Israel to give away an overwhelming majority of the West Bank, albeit in phases. This does not mean that the summit is destined to lead to an agreement, but given Barak's character, he will try very hard to achieve a deal.

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