

# Palestinian Track: Getting Down to Business

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Apr 28, 2000

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## Brief Analysis

**W**ith Israeli-Palestinian peace talks getting underway in Eilat this weekend, the Middle East seems to be switching peace tracks yet again. After President Bill Clinton held separate White House meetings with Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority (PA) chairman Yasir Arafat earlier this month, State Department spokesman James Rubin said, "In our judgment, the next six to eight weeks could well be a decisive phase in the pursuit of peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis. . . . That phase obviously is now including a more intensive American involvement." This shift--after several months of focusing on Syria talks--does not necessarily mean that the Syrian track can be considered dead and buried (and indeed Arab leaders such as Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah are said to be quietly seeking to revive that track). Yet, operationally, it means that the United States and Israel will no longer wait for Syria as they revive the Palestinian track and plan for Israel's pullback from Lebanon in July.

**Action May Be Away from the Table** The two April White House meetings were significant as the first engagement of the leaders on the critical substantive issues of the Palestinian track. Rubin said the leaders not only put forward their own positions but also "demonstrated that they were aware of the other leader's needs." According to sources close to the negotiation, Arafat acknowledged to Clinton that some large settlements will be annexed by Israel in any final status deal. For his part, Barak acknowledged the need for large swaths of contiguous territory in the West Bank to be granted the Palestinians, perhaps up to 70 percent of the territories.

Until now, the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks have been desultory. Each side accuses the other of having no mandate to commit beyond publicly declared opening positions. Hence, it is not surprising that the recent talks at Bolling Air Force Base received little attention in the Middle East, and it is possible that the meetings in Eilat could be more of the same.

The publics on both sides have figured out that breakthroughs never come from big official meetings with media photo-ops; rather, the action is almost always elsewhere. In 1993, the cameras were focused on peace talks in Washington while the landmark breakthrough occurred in Oslo. This has largely been the subsequent pattern. These breakthroughs have occurred when the leaders on all sides engage directly, and/or deputize an authoritative

channel to explore the tradeoffs that make for the parameters of any deal.

There were signs last month that such a back channel might be emerging. Barak and Arafat held a secret meeting at a quiet part of Ben-Gurion Airport, and the two agreed that top Palestinian officials Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and Ahmed Qurie (Abu Ala) would meet top Labor officials, Tourism Minister (ex-military chief of staff) Amnon Lipkin-Shahak and Interior Security Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami. Four subsequent meetings were held, but no document drafts were exchanged. Whether this channel materializes into something important is unclear, but the success of this or any channel will depend on whether Barak and Arafat meet regularly to discuss the gaps and the domestic political limits of the other side. Subsequently, they will need to provide their authorized negotiators with the required backing on specific issues to make a deal. This would mean that U.S. bridging proposals would be reserved for those issues on which the sides are genuinely deadlocked, and not serve as a crutch or substitute for hard bargaining between the parties. In a switch for Barak, Israel has acceded to a stepped-up role for the United States with the Palestinians, including an American seat at the peace table, something which in the past Barak averred that he opposed. U.S. officials have already stated publicly that Ambassador Dennis Ross will not be spending all his time in Eilat, but will also be "shuttling back and forth with the leaders."

**Gaps Are Wide** The divisions between the sides not only reflect opening positions on the range of issues dealing with statehood, territory, settlements, security arrangements, refugees, and water, but rather illustrate different conceptual approaches to the talks. Below are a few examples:

- Land Swaps.** The Palestinians believe that, because Israel yielded 100 percent of the Sinai to Egypt and agreed to land swaps with Jordan in 1994 (to compensate Amman for the offsetting amount of land taken by Israel decades ago along their joint border), it has accepted two important precedents: full withdrawal and land swaps. Barak has adamantly rejected both ideas.

- Final Status or Yet Another Interim Deal.** The idea of a final status deal has appeal to both parties. They can each tell their respective publics that this is the last round of concessions so that each side can play their last hand. This sense of finality particularly appeals to Israelis, some of whom believe that the problem with the Oslo incrementalist approach is that Israel has been making "salami-style" territorial concessions for seven years without any sense of closure on future Palestinian demands. If there is no finality to final status, each side will negotiate with an eye toward yet another "final" round down the road. Moreover, segments of the Israeli public will not like the idea that Israel could be granting statehood to the Palestinians without obtaining closure on Palestinian demands. But some, like Cabinet Minister and Barak-confidant Haim Ramon, believe that deferring some issues is inevitable. He recognizes, for example, that Palestinians do not just want Jerusalem suburbs but rather much of the Old City, which runs counter to a key Barak "red line." A similar gulf separates positions on the Jordan Valley. Ramon and others prefer to defer these issues and reach a deal on what is politically feasible now rather than risk an uneasy stalemate that could deteriorate into violence. Ramon indicated this week that he would support yielding 70 percent of the West Bank in a final status deal, and that Israel could annex the areas where 130,000 of the estimated 180,000 Jewish settlers live--about 10 percent of the West Bank--leaving the 20 percent balance (primarily Jordan Valley) for future negotiations. But even this plan presupposes that Barak could make substantial concessions for just another "interim deal"--an untested proposition.

- Right of Return.** So far, Arafat has not even hinted publicly that Palestinians will fall short of achieving a "right of return" to pre-1967 Israel, despite wall-to-wall Israeli opposition to the idea. Informally, Palestinians say that the symbolism of such an Israeli concession is more important than its implementation, with Palestinians focusing their energies on their own absorptive capacity inside their future state. But symbols are nonetheless real and remain a substantial roadblock, as is the case of the Palestinian demand that Israel accept responsibility for creating the refugee problem through its actions in 1947-48--another highly charged demand that Barak rejects.

Time Is Short There is no doubt that the Clinton administration would like a framework agreement on permanent status (FAPS) by sometime in June (hence Rubin's reference to six to eight weeks) before Israel becomes preoccupied with a unilateral pullback from Lebanon in early July. Amid predictions that such a pullback may be met with some Syrian-backed violence, it is clear that that Washington would like to herald a diplomatic breakthrough on the Palestinian track first. Should the sides narrow the gaps between now and June, Clinton will almost certainly invite Barak and Arafat for a U.S.-based summit in order to seal a "framework" deal. If the differences are wide, however, the net effect is that the framework will be jettisoned and both sides will set their sights on the September 13 deadline--and hope the summer along the Lebanese border is not too hot.

David Makovsky will soon join the Institute as senior fellow and director of the Project on America, Israel, and the Peace Process.

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