

Mideast Update:

Report from a Trip to Israel, Jordan, Egypt, and the Palestinian Authority

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Brief Analysis

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General Observations Meetings with the four leaders--Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak, Jordan's King Abdullah II, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, and Palestinian Authority (PA) chairman Yasir Arafat--underscore the vitality of regional leadership. All seemed healthy, engaged, self-assured, and in command. Barak is clearly a man with a mission, convinced that his approach and timetable for peacemaking are both right and doable. Abdullah seems much more at ease with his responsibilities than he was just six months ago, authoritatively conversant in domestic and economic affairs. Mubarak appears quite fit, following a stay in a French hospital. And Arafat seemed more robust and less dogged by health issues than in recent meetings.

Despite professed efforts from all sides to reach peace accords on both the Palestinian and Syrian/Lebanese track, the first nine months of the year 2000 are likely to be very hot, with the possibility of brinkmanship and violence on all fronts. The potential for a serious escalation should not be discounted. Although crises may open the door to opportunity, crises can also deteriorate into violence and confrontation.

Palestinian Track Both Israel and the PA claim to want the Framework Agreement on Permanent Status (FAPS), due for February 2000, to be the landmark accord that ends the conflict. However, there is considerable doubt as to whether the parties (especially the Palestinians) are ready for the compromises necessary to achieve that historic breakthrough. Indeed, senior officials in Jordan, Egypt, and even in Israel cautioned that it could well take years to reach such a conclusive deal.

On the positive side, numerous Arab officials offered pragmatic--rather than ideological--approaches to solving

various "final-status" problems. These included Palestinian demands for territory that are based not on rights but on the need for absorptive capacity to ensure a viable Palestinian state as well as realistic appraisals of how many Palestinians might take advantage of the option of return to Israel, which one Arab leader estimated at no more than 60,000. On the Israeli side, the recent decision to dismantle twelve wildcat settlements--by agreement with settler leaders--underscores Barak's understanding of the need to build peace among Israelis before Israel can make further concessions to make peace with the Arabs.

On the negative side, there is no sign that the two sides are anywhere close to each other in the substance of solutions. The most important issue here is the need for Palestinians to recognize that a final deal will leave them with less than 100 percent of the West Bank and Gaza, a fact which no Palestinian leader has begun to explain to Palestinian public opinion. To the contrary, unrealizable expectations remain daily fare. In this climate, there is likely to be much greater confrontation between now and February. Such confrontation could come from four sources which are not mutually exclusive: the Palestinian street, reflecting anxiety with proposed concessions; the Palestinian leadership, providing cover for proposed concessions and as a way to pressure Israel to demand less; from Palestinian and Islamic extremists supported vigorously by Iran as a way to scuttle the process altogether; and from fringe elements within the Israeli settler movement. The potential for serious escalation, emerging principally from a Palestinian effort to exert pressure on Israel via street demonstrations and other forms of tactical violence, remains high.

Approaching the Permanent Status Negotiations
The Israeli perspective. Israel wants the FAPS to include an unambiguous commitment to the end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with both sides forswearing any claims beyond those governed by the agreement itself. The FAPS would include principles governing compromise, including the idea of political separation. By this, Israel would concede as much contiguity of Palestinian territory as possible as well as make concessions to help ensure the economic vitality of the new entity. Issues not resolved would be postponed for future negotiations. There will likely be three agreements: FAPS (February 2000), a Comprehensive Agreement on Permanent Status (CAPS, September 2000), and an eventual peace treaty between the two entities.

The Palestinian perspective. The PA would prefer a single agreement--a peace treaty between two independent states--but it has accepted Israel's conceptual outline. The Palestinians argue that the FAPS should address all items in an equal and detailed manner, with the September CAPS accord being just a technical agreement on implementing the FAPS principles. They reject the idea to postpone items not agreed. Palestinians endorse political separation because it implies full or nearly full sovereignty, but suggestions to limit the movement of people and goods scare them because they want the connection to Israel both in economic (e.g., workers) and human (e.g., links to Israeli Arabs) terms.

U.S. role. Both sides believe a Camp David-style summit will be an opportunity to use the offices of the U.S. president to pressure the other side. Arafat would use it to redress a perceived imbalance of power with Israel; Barak would use it to provide Arafat with cover to make historic compromises. Generally, the PA leadership believes that no peace process problem can be solved without an active and forceful U.S. role. If a detailed, comprehensive FAPS cannot be reached, then the parties face a decision either to leave a summit without an agreement--thereby probably writing off the balance of the Clinton administration--or accepting a watered-down, vague FAPS that falls short of the historic end-of-the-conflict accord.

Compared with previous visits, regional leaders voiced a remarkable lack of complaint against the United States on policy issues, including aid levels. At the same time, some Israeli officials strongly criticized the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) for a lax approach to demanding security cooperation and full compliance with security obligations from the PA.

Jordan. Although Jordan is organically connected to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, Amman has become less vocal about items on the final status agenda, including Jerusalem and borders. The more pressing issue for Jordan is the impact of final status on the long-term relationship between Transjordanians and Palestinians within Jordan. In this regard, Jordanians are active on two final status issues--refugees and water--because of their domestic implications inside the kingdom. (Also, an interesting demographic change inside Jordan is the growing importance of the Iraqi expatriate community, which today numbers about 400,000--nearly twice as many as the total number of residents in Jordan's Palestinian refugee camps.)

Regional Threats On Iraq. Arab and Israeli leaders were in general agreement that easing sanctions would only bolster Iraqi president Saddam Husayn. Most also evinced fear that the absence of inspections of Saddam's weapons programs is opening up an increasingly dangerous opportunity for Saddam. Furthermore, all argued that efforts to support the Iraqi opposition cannot be a substitute for assertive U.S. action to unseat Saddam.

On Iran. Around the region, Iran is considered to be a major threat and the prime mover behind terrorism. Several leaders cited the enhanced support Iran is providing radical Islamist organizations. Regional leaders commented that the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) is now cooperating with Hizballah in operations in South Lebanon, that Iran is seeking alternative routes to supply Hizballah in the event of an Israel--Syria peace deal, and that Iran is pressing Hamas and its other clients to undertake strategic terrorism to scuttle the peace process altogether. There was general agreement that Iranian president Muhammad Khatami was either implicit in or irrelevant to Iran's continued pursuit of terrorism.

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The Syrian Factor Arab leaders expressed a real desire to witness the final end of the Arab-Israeli conflict so that they can focus more on pressing domestic problems. Economic problems top the national agenda, with the need to increase economic growth rates being a priority. In this context, both Jordan and Egypt offered logical reasons why Syria needed peace now and each presented itself as the potential key intermediary for this track to reach a breakthrough. Nevertheless, there was considerable speculation as to why this track is at an impasse.

Optimistic view. Some argued that the health of Syria's two main actors--President Asad and Foreign Minister al-Shara--is the only thing holding up resumption of talks, with progress most likely after a FAPS agreement (mid-February) and before Barak's promised pull-out from Lebanon (July 7). In some Arab capitals, there were rumors of secret talks between Syria and Israel based on the assumption that Asad will not restart open talks unless he is sure of their success. According to this argument, the resumption of official talks will itself mean that a deal has been struck.

Pessimistic view. Others argued that despite all the reasons for negotiations to proceed, the Syrians have adopted a hard-line negotiating strategy that is a mystery. Here, many suggested that the succession issue weighs most heavily in Asad's mind; indeed, there was a near-unanimous view that Bashar's succession is not guaranteed. Some opined that Asad's death may lead to enhanced military rule or a collective leadership, either of which would work against peace. One insightful observer noted that the weaker Asad is internally (perhaps as a result of ill-health or preoccupation with succession), then the tougher Asad is externally (in terms of negotiating positions).

On Lebanon If Syrian diplomacy is a mystery, than Israel's Lebanon policy is a gamble. Israel has reaffirmed its intention to withdraw from southern Lebanon by agreement by July 7, 2000, and although a unilateral withdrawal is not part of the Barak government's program, it remains a distinct possibility. The idea of defending Israel from the international border has become more popular among Israelis as Israelis grow more confident of their ability to deter and retaliate via air power rather than ground troops. Syria wants Israel to bleed in Lebanon as a lever to force Israeli concessions on the Golan. Were Israel to withdraw, it would be in a strong position to justify defensive actions

against cross-border attacks. While an Israeli withdrawal might lower Israel's incentive to deal over the Golan, Israeli withdrawal is unlikely to raise the pressure on Syria to withdraw its own forces from Lebanon, as few in Israel question Syria's preeminent role in Lebanon.

The mere threat of unilateral withdrawal may pressure Syria into resuming serious peace talks, but the best way to force Asad's hand would be to reach a FAPS agreement with Arafat, threatening Asad with being the odd man out of peacemaking once again. And withdrawal itself could be risky. There was a consensus inside Israel that unilateral withdrawal would trigger common interests among Iran, Syria, and Hizballah to raise the level of attacks against Israel. There was even fear that Syria may be so unnerved by an Israeli withdrawal that it may begin a process of conflict that could deteriorate to a level of confrontation not witnessed since 1982.

Regional Cooperation or Regional Rivalry? Despite two decades of peace, Egypt generally views Israel through a lens of competition, not cooperation. Egypt will only endorse those initiatives that have a direct benefit to Egypt's national interest, as opposed to those projects that enhance the climate of regional cooperation. Hence, Cairo will likely host a MENA summit in mid-2000, because it bolsters Egypt's international economic prospects, but Cairo has nixed the resumption of high-level multilateral talks, effectively giving Syria a veto over this important regional problem-solving process. Egypt's ambition to regional preeminence and its reluctance to entertain any military-to-military relationship with Israel, outside the context of the peace treaty liaison meetings, underscores the frigidity of the cold peace. In this context, Israeli officials view with deepening concern the upgrading of the Egyptian armed forces, especially the air force and navy.

In Jordan, there was considerable interest in the growing missile threat from Iraq and Iran and the utility of a unified missile defense umbrella. Jordanians are also interested in enhancing economic cooperation with Israel, especially via additional Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZ) to match the impressive success of the inaugural QIZ in Irbid. However, there remains deeply ingrained reluctance in Jordanian society to participate in cultural, political, or human normalization and more leadership is needed from political authorities to make this happen.

This Special Policy Forum report was prepared by Rania al-Shirawi. ❖

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