

Barak, the United States, and the Middle East Peace Process

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Aug 18, 1999

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Brief Analysis

ROBERT PELLETREAU

Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak faces multiple challenges: He has to implement an agreement he did not negotiate; he has to rebuild a sense of partnership between Israel and the Arab countries; he has to restore the negotiating context, a task not made easier by the Israeli practice of one government not necessarily sharing full information about the course of negotiations with successor governments; and he wants to restructure the third-party role of the United States back to the role of facilitator it played in the Yitzhak Rabin--Shimon Peres era.

Barak wants time for further negotiations with the Palestinians; both parties have to get used to each other and to establish important personal relationships. The postponement of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's trip must be understood in this context. Although a visit often creates its own opportunities, the trip--whenver it takes place--is likely to be designed solely as a fact-finding visit, in line with the tradition of secretarial visits not raising expectations.

A direct negotiating relationship on the Syrian and Lebanese front needs to be restored, but the United States is required as a catalyst to negotiations between Israel and Syria. A resumption of the Syrian--Israeli negotiations would mean a multi-visit process for Albright. Syria is ready, even eager, for negotiations, but it will be reluctant to put forward suggestions of its own. Damascus has been concerned about the status of what it describes as agreements reached in the previous negotiations. In the last round, there was no Israeli commitment to Syria about withdrawal to the June 4, 1967, line. Instead, there was an understanding that if everything else was negotiated satisfactorily, the territorial issue could be negotiated satisfactorily, too. It is inaccurate for either side to claim that there was more than that.

HARVEY SICHERMAN

Three factors determine the likelihood of progress in the Middle East peace process:

- A favorable set of strategic circumstances. Washington was able to organize the 1991 Madrid conference because of the fall of the Soviet Union and the defeat of Iraq in the Gulf War.
- Trust between the leaders that each wants a deal and is capable of carrying it out. This happened in the Palestinian--

Israeli case with Oslo but did not happen with the Syrian side.

- Real pressure on the ground for change. In the early 1990s, this was present primarily on the Israeli--Palestinian side because of the legacy of the intifada (uprising) and the very difficult relationship between the Israeli military occupation and the Palestinian population. By contrast, there was no real push for change on the Golan Heights.

Currently, these three factors are present more on the Syrian front than on the Palestinian front. Israeli and Syrian public statements indicate the two leaders trust each other. Both Israel and Syria face pressures on the ground for movement. Israel is ready to see movement on the land issue in the Golan Heights, plus there is pressure on Barak for progress because he has announced that Israel will withdraw from Lebanon within a year. Even more important is the Syrian eagerness for action, motivated largely by President Hafiz al-Asad's declining health. He wants the United States to have a stake in the survival of his legacy and in a smooth transition to the rule of his son and anointed heir, Bashar; for this, Asad needs an agreement with Israel.

The United States should assume the role of broker, withdrawing a little from its hyperactive role at Wye.

Washington should not take too much responsibility on itself for assuring the outcome of an agreement. It should let the parties negotiate by themselves while concentrating on reducing the risks the parties take in making a deal.

ROBERT SATLOFF

The region is full of remarkable contradictions. First, Israelis and Palestinians have established a dense network of joint committees, yet the prospects for progress on the Israeli--Palestinian track are slim; at the same time, there are no negotiations and no direct contacts between Israelis and Syrians, but an Israeli--Syrian agreement seems in reach. Second, the recent U.S.--Israeli communique after Barak's visit showed a remarkable strengthening of the U.S.--Israeli relationship, yet it is the Israelis who do not want Albright to come to the region and the Arabs who want the trip. Third, the Palestinians are refusing to start "final-status" talks until all Israeli redeployments are completed, but the Wye accords say very clearly that the talks are to start after the first redeployment--which occurred nine months ago--irrespective of what happens with the second or third redeployments. Similarly, Syria is insisting that Israel agree to "pay a fee" to get into negotiations--that is, make a commitment to withdraw to the 1967 line. In other words, it is the stronger, richer state that is going through hoops so it can return territory to the weaker. Finally, Syria supports Lebanon's insistence that Israel withdraw to the international border drawn in 1923 between the French and British mandates, but Damascus also insists that the same 1923 border demarcation has no validity when it comes to the Syrian--Israeli border, and that Israel must instead withdraw to the 1967 line.

Throughout the area, leaders are putting their houses in order, expecting important events ahead:

- In Israel, Barak has announced his security cabinet, comprising two-thirds of the entire cabinet. Yet he clearly does not intend to consult closely with his security cabinet; he intends to make decisions by himself. With a huge Knesset majority, he has shaped a government that he can run as he wishes.
- Palestinian Authority (PA) chairman Yasir Arafat has been concerned about the unity of Palestinian ranks as final-status negotiations are approaching. There have been unity talks with at least one of the rejectionist front groups, George Habash's People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). But Arafat is not requiring Hamas to close its military or terrorist options as part of this drive for unity.
- In Syria, Asad has retired a number of senior military officers and strengthened the role of his family. The other major domestic development is Syria's vice president, ĀAbd al-Halim Khaddam, telling the Palestinian rejectionist front to prepare for peace with Israel. Syria appears to want the secular rejectionists to reinject themselves into the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to pressure Arafat during the final-status negotiations with Israel.

- Jordan's King Abdullah II met with bankers to reassure his country's Palestinians that their capital will be safe in the event of tension between East Bankers and Palestinians. There is a rising reactionary movement inside Jordan, led by Speaker of the Parliament ĀAbd al-Hadi al-Majali, that opposes the permanent settlement of Palestinian refugees inside Jordan; despite government demurrals, however, such an outcome is likely.

Barak and Arafat have an interest in reaching some kind of early agreement. Arafat knows he will achieve less through a policy of confrontation than he will through one that combines a degree of brinkmanship and agreement with Israel. For his part, Barak cannot afford to be accused of talking a good game but not delivering, and he cannot know for sure that Asad will ever come to his rescue.

In theory, the Israel--Syria negotiations will be easier to complete, as they are real estate transactions, not a divorce. As a measure of Asad's eagerness, consider that he was willing to have a channel to former Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's government without an a priori Israeli commitment to a certain line of withdrawal. None of this suggests that Asad will change his stand. He may change speed, but not substance. The same could be said about Barak: he may be a faster decision maker than Rabin, but perhaps a tougher negotiator. Barak will combine Rabin's approach of focusing on security and Peres's approach of focusing on normalization, planning to achieve both by lubricating the deal with American and European money.

This Special Policy Forum report was prepared by Heiko Stoiber.

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