The Barak-Clinton Summit Meeting:

Setting the Agenda

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Brief Analysis

Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak arrives in Washington this week amid an aura of unprecedented anticipation and expectation. His main goal is to reaffirm a multifaceted partnership between Israel and the United States and to sketch a basic understanding on the strategic goals and operational plans for advancing the Arab-Israeli peace process. How he and President Bill Clinton define the practical details of their relationship will go far in determining the success of their joint effort.

For Barak, his meetings with Clinton will establish the tenor of their personal relationship, define strategies, allot roles, and determine tactics. Items raised in these meetings will be considered essential elements of the bilateral agenda throughout the balance of the two leaders' terms of office; items deemed not important enough to be raised are likely to be assigned a lower priority for the indefinite future. More important than any specific item in the peace process, the key issues for the two leaders are to define common objectives, political constraints, and areas of responsibility in the negotiations.

Addressing Expectations: A high priority for the two leaders will be to find the proper pace for injecting momentum into the public diplomacy of the peace process without exaggerating the likelihood of early success. On the Palestinian track, the widespread assumption is that "Wye implementation" -- universally understood to mean Israel's fulfillment of the second and third installments of the "second Oslo redeployment," without much regard to Palestinian obligations -- is a simple and speedy process, requiring perhaps a couple of weeks at most. Similarly, on the Syria track, the exchange of public compliments between Barak and Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad, combined with Barak's own promise to bring Israeli troops back from Lebanon within one year, has created a sense of snowballing inevitability.

The reality is, of course, much more complicated. Although U.S. officials were silent on Palestinian noncompliance with Wye throughout Israel's election campaign, they now privately volunteer a long list of outstanding Palestinian obligations; these include security-related items (registration and confiscation of weapons), legal issues (responding, whether affirmatively or not, to Israeli requests for the transfer of terrorist suspects or even to permit the convening of the legal committee established at Wye), and the entire range of anti-incitement/people-to-people issues. And on

the Syria track, there is some strong evidence -- including lessons to be learned from Asad's flirtation, via intermediaries, with Netanyahu -- that Syria may be willing to take back the Golan Heights from Israel if offered in its entirety, but there is much less evidence that Syria is willing to provide Israel with adequate compensation for the exchange. In short, there is not only reason for healthy skepticism about whether the historic achievements both Clinton and Barak seek are feasible within a matter of months, but also a need to find room in the peace diplomacy to reflect this.

Both leaders think big -- they have spoken about "ending the Arab-Israeli conflict" -- and both have domestic constraints that place a nine- to twelve-month deadline on either their ability to concentrate fully on Middle East peacemaking (for Clinton) or their need to show tangible results for their efforts (for Barak). Having a common sense of urgency and opportunity, however, does not guarantee a common approach. Barak has vowed to pursue all tracks of the peace process with equal intensity; maintaining this pose makes sense until opportunity for rapid progress beckons on one or the other track. The U.S. side is itself characterized by two approaches -- on the one hand, a desire to reinvigorate the U.S.-Israel partnership, along the lines of Clinton's relationship with the late Yitzhak Rabin; and on the other hand, a desire to see swift progress on all tracks of negotiations. These approaches could be complementary but are not necessarily so, and they may even be contradictory. The clearest example of the latter is Washington's ambiguous communication to Syria of Rabin's 1993 hypothetical proposal on Golan withdrawal. Clinton's recent statement -- never retracted -- supporting the Palestinian right "to live wherever they want to live" -- may also belong in this category.

U.S. Role: Defining the U.S. role in the various tracks of negotiations will also be a high priority in these meetings. Traditionally, the U.S. role has been to serve as key mediator in the Syrian negotiations and as cheerleader, fundraiser, and tablesetter -- but not active negotiator -- in the Palestinian talks. For many reasons, these roles changed under Netanyahu, with Damascus and Jerusalem engaged in talks via a nongovernmental third party and the United States, originally at Israel's urging, playing an unprecedented role as part- negotiator/part-referee/full-player in the Palestinian talks. The task at hand is more complicated than simply returning to the status quo ante. On the Oslo track, a new U.S.-Palestinian relationship has blossomed over the last three years, both on the personal level between leaders and on the bureaucratic level between governmental institutions. And on the Syria track, a simple reversion to the format of semiformal talks, along the lines of those suspended in March 1996 by Shimon Peres following the Hamas/Islamic Jihad bus bombings, does not reflect the urgency (or time constraints) that are behind Barak's and Clinton's sense of opportunity. With both tracks, a new framework for U.S. participation is needed.

Strategic Cooperation: If Clinton and Barak are keen to recreate the tenor of the Clinton-Rabin relationship, then that will also mean a return to the formula of strategic offsets for Israeli moves in the peace process. Characterized since 1993 as a policy of "reducing Israel's risks for peace," this will entail enhanced bilateral cooperation on strategic, military, diplomatic, and economic issues as a means of strengthening Israel's (and, specifically, Barak's) ability to make concessions in the peace talks. This is likely to focus on rejuvenating several cooperative efforts in the defense arena that had not gone forward, or which had been delayed or shelved during the Netanyahu era, as well as on developing new realms of cooperation.

Topping the list will be the $1.2 billion Wye implementation package, which included a one-time grant to Israel, spread over three years, to compensate for "risks for peace" incurred by completing the Wye redeployments. The package reportedly included funding for the cost of relocating a reserve armored division and an infantry training facility now located in the West Bank, the acquisition of an unspecified number of AH-64D Apache Longbow attack helicopters, the procurement of ground-based sensors and surveillance equipment to enhance Israel's ability to thwart infiltrators and fight terror, and up to five signals-intelligence aircraft. To date, Congress has not approved

any of the Wye funding for Israel or the smaller sums for the Palestinians; indeed, the only Wye-related funding approved has been a supplemental allocation of $100 million for Jordan. Several other bilateral initiatives are likely to be considered anew, including U.S. funding for a third Arrow antimissile battery; moving the joint BoostPhase Intercept (BPI) missile defense program beyond the studies phase to prototype development; considering Israeli requests for funding of a new Boost-Phase Launch Intercept (BPLI) concept (BPI attacks the missiles shortly after launch, whereas BPLI attacks the missile launchers); increased funding for the THEL laser, which is designed to shoot down Katyusha rockets (and which will be especially important if Israel withdraws from Lebanon), to allow production beyond the one prototype built thus far; and easing restrictions on Israeli transfers of American technology in order to open the door for the export of the Arrow antimissile interceptor and other products incorporating U.S. technology.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute.

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