

The Middle East Peace Process in the Wake of Ehud Barak's Victory

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Jun 22, 1999

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

Israel. Gen. Ehud Barak was elected with a remarkable mandate. The Israeli electorate decided that Israel was stuck on several fronts -- social issues, the economy, and peace -- and needed a new prime minister to get things moving. Change cannot be expected immediately, though, and Barak deserves time to build a coalition and settle in. U.S. president Bill Clinton has invited Barak to come to the United States and Barak will come to Washington as soon as possible.

Israel and the United States share a special unshakable relationship built on shared values, principles, beliefs, and interests. That was not altered over the last three years and will not change. Over the last three years, however, the working relationship between the United States and Israel was not characterized by the mutual confidence and trust that existed previously during the administration of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. The Clinton administration is now determined to return to that relationship that so benefited the peace process.

The Palestinian Track. The Oslo accords transformed the Arab-Israeli conflict fundamentally. Where once there was rejection and denial, there now is acceptance and mutual recognition. Existential problems were transformed into political problems to be negotiated. The pathway and timetable of the Oslo process have not been achieved; however, the process has shown extraordinary durability. Few could have believed that the process would have survived all the crises and setbacks that have arisen since September 13, 1993, including Dr. Baruch Goldstein's act of terror, the assassination of one of the process's architects, the Palestinian terrorism of 1996, the 1996 election of an opponent of Oslo to the Israeli prime ministership, and the opening of the Jerusalem tunnel and the violence that ensued thereafter. In the last three years, despite all the problems, there were two agreements: Hebron and Wye. This is true proof of the endurance of the process, given that the relationship between the Israeli and Palestinian governments has been one of the casualties of the last three years.

The Oslo pathway has survived because there is no acceptable alternative to the pursuit of peace. Israelis and Palestinians are not going anyplace. History and geography have destined that the two parties live as neighbors. They can live in perpetual struggle and conflict or in peace -- Oslo presented the pathway for this choice.

The Syrian and Lebanese Track. From 1993 to 1996, there were direct negotiations between the Syrians and Israelis.

The two parties agreed to a concept for what both sides were looking to do, consisting of four elements: peace and its content; withdrawal and its content; security arrangements and their content; and a timetable for the interrelationship of the process of withdrawal and the introduction of the elements of peace.

Although there were no direct negotiations over the last three years, the fact that emissaries carried messages between the two parties indicate that both sides wanted to preserve and promote the process. In the period since the recent Israeli elections, there have been indications from both sides that point to a mutual desire to see negotiations resumed and completed on these four premises.

As for the Lebanese track, there have been no negotiations since 1996, but the Israel-Lebanese Monitoring Group (ILMG) has continued to meet regularly. The ILMG does not deal with negotiating peace, but it does deal with defusing tensions and avoiding escalation. To this extent, the ILMG meetings reflect a desire between the parties to resolve conflicts. Especially given Barak's pledge to extract Israeli soldiers from Lebanon through negotiations, the United States will make an effort on this track as well.

The Multilateral Track. If Barak's election is to signal a new era in which serious work will be done to promote peace, all tracks -- the bilateral tracks, the multilateral track, and the economic summit process -- must operate. The multilateral track, which was launched at the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991, is not a substitute for bilateral negotiations. Headway on the multilaterals is contingent upon success in the bilateral negotiations. The multilaterals instead deal with regional issues that the bilaterals could not address. The issues for which working groups were established were arms control, regional economic development, the environment, water, and refugees. The multilateral process was active until 1996, but it has been frozen since. This does not mean that the progress made was undone; certain work is still being done. "Track II diplomacy" has continued, especially in the area of arms control. There also have been informal inter-sessional meetings that have brought Arabs and Israelis together to build databases on issues such as water, the environment, and refugees. The infrastructure for the multilaterals still exists, but it needs to be energized.

Peace is not a spectator sport: To achieve a broader peace, the broader Arab orbit cannot sit on the sidelines. For a comprehensive peace, the Arab world must be a participant; it too has a responsibility to support and work for peace.

Keys for the Future. The absence of an acceptable alternative creates an incentive to negotiate, but it does not create a basis for agreements -- it is essentially a "negative." The partners need to build "positives" based on solving problems together. A mutual conviction needs to be built based on what is possible and based on each other's intentions. Once this conviction of common purpose is built, then there will be the positive basis to reach agreements.

Alongside all this, the people-to-people component of the process must be built up. The people-to-people annex in the Oslo Interim Agreement needs to be implemented. Peace needs to be built between the people who see the benefits of compromise and the logic behind agreement; peace cannot only be between negotiators and leaders.

Even then, when there is serious engagement, it will not be easy, and it will take time. This is a historic conflict in which every leader will be extremely careful not to make a historic mistake. Leaders need to be satisfied that they are not giving up more than what is necessary and that the concessions each makes are necessary and justified. Owing to the real differences on issues, intensive and exhausting negotiations loom ahead. Each side must work through these differences and engage each other to the extent that they can understand each other's limitations.

The United States will do all that it can to promote peace in a region in which Americans have been working for peace since the administration of Harry S. Truman. The United States will be active and will work with the parties to find creative ways to bridge differences, but the United States cannot take on the role of negotiating for the parties. Although the United States wants peace -- and has the responsibility to help the parties achieve it -- Washington

cannot take the place of the parties themselves, and it cannot force a settlement.

This Special Soref Symposium Report was prepared by Benjamin Orbach.

Policy #213

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Facing Syria's Food Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ishtar Al Shami

(/policy-analysis/facing-syrias-food-crisis)

TOPICS

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)