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

by Dennis Ross **(/experts/dennis-ross)**

Jun 17, 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.

In-Depth Reports

I am appearing here tonight at what can only be described as an interesting time. There has been an election in Israel and there is a new prime minister, Ehud Barak, who won with a remarkable mandate.

It is fair to say that the Israeli electorate perceived that the country was stuck both on social issues especially the religious/secular questions and on the economy, in terms of the increasing unemployment and plummeting growth rates. With the Israeli-Palestinian track mired in mistrust, and with all the other tracks pretty much frozen, the country was also stuck on the question of peace.

The new prime minister has made it very clear that he intends to get Israel moving again. That is what the country was voting for, and therefore the new prime minister deserves the time not only to put together a government but also to get it settled and established.

President Bill Clinton has invited him to come here when he has done that, and Ehud Barak has made it clear that he will come as soon as he can. Because of the very special relationship between the United States and Israel, it is fitting and appropriate that a new Israeli prime minister would come to the United States to see the president as soon as he could after forming a new government. The U.S.-Israeli relationship is built on shared values, principles, beliefs, and interests, and it is a relationship of enduring character.

It is clear that the last few years were not a simple time in U.S.-Israel relations, and yet the special relationship that embodies Americas commitment to Israel and its security was not shaken and will not be shaken.

But the last three years did affect the character of the working relationship on peace that America had with Israel; although the U.S. government did not seek a change, the mutual confidence and trust that had existed during Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabins time was not present. That is not the way we wanted it to be, and it is not the way it should be. The Clinton administration is determined to return to the kind of productive working relationship with Israel on peace that existed previously, not only because it is in Americas interests, but also because it is in the interests of Israel and the cause of peace. Knowing the prime minister, the president, and the secretary of state as I do, I am confident that this type of partnership can and will be reestablished.

There is no doubt that this is a hopeful time; however, it is also a time when we, as a government, have not yet had a chance to consult with the new prime minister. Obviously, there has not yet been an opportunity to get into a discussion about the details of the peace process.

In light of that, tonight I will only offer some general impressions about the various negotiating tracks, where they have been, and what has shaped them. Then I will offer some concluding thoughts on what the U.S. role will be in the peace process and on what it will take to be successful.

Let me start with the Palestinian track. There is no question that Oslo changed the landscape of peacemaking in the Middle East. It fundamentally transformed the Israeli-Palestinian part of the Arab-Israeli conflict by taking an existential conflict and changing it into a political process in which the differences were to be negotiated. Where there was once mutual denial of the others identity and legitimacy, there is now mutual recognition. Where there was once mutual rejection of dialogue, there is now mutual acceptance of negotiations as a way to deal with the different needs and interests of the sides. Oslo not only represented a psychological change from the past; it also provided a pathway that laid out phases and timetables.

Although there were clear accomplishments on the ground, the pathway and the timetables were not achieved. And yet it is remarkable to think about how the pathway endured. Few of the people present during the signing of the Declaration of Principles on September 13, 1993, would have believed that the peace process could have survived such traumatic and dramatic events as the assassination of its architect; four bombs in nine days; the election of a candidate who ran against Oslo; and the opening of a tunnel in Jerusalem that spawned violence which led to the deaths of seventy Palestinians and fifteen members of the Israel Defense Forces. These examples highlight the survivability of the pathway in circumstances where few would have believed it could or would survive.

The question therefore arises, why has it survived? The answer has always been very simple and pretty fundamental: There is no acceptable alternative to the pursuit of peace. Neither Israelis nor Palestinians are going anyplace. History and geography have destined them to live as neighbors and they have only two choices either they can live in perpetual struggle, conflict, and pain, or they can live in peace.

At Oslo, they chose to live in peace. Oslo represented a pathway to that peace; through negotiations, it produced a number of profound changes on the ground. In fact, today there is a very different situation on the ground than there was before Oslo. There is a Palestinian Authority that governs Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. Oslo has created a new reality. That new reality and the durability of the pathway shape a different world and the choices that both sides face when they look at each other. One of the best measures of the changed realities created by Oslo is that, despite all the difficulties over the last three years, two agreements Hebron and Wye were signed. Nonetheless, one of the casualties of the last three years was the relationship between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority. The deterioration of this relationship helps to explain why Hebron and Wye were never fully implemented. The new Israeli government, just like its Palestinian counterpart, will have to deal with choices that are different from before. These differences along with the new realities on the ground will shape the way they look at the future and what they choose to do about it.

Now, a word about the Syrian track. From 1993 to 1996, the Syrians and Israelis held direct negotiations. For the last three years, there were no direct negotiations, but emissaries did convey messages. It is not possible at this point to evaluate the results of the emissaries work. But the fact of emissaries going back and forth is an indication that both sides wanted to preserve the process and see if they could promote it. That, too, says a lot about peacemaking and the landscape of the Middle East. It is significant, however, that the direct negotiations that took place between 1993 and 1996 established an agreed concept, one in which both sides agreed to try to negotiate a peace settlement based on four primary elements.

Such a peace settlement could be likened to a peace table that has four legs. One leg is peace and its content. One leg is withdrawal and its content. One leg is security arrangements and their content. And the last leg is a timetable the interrelationship on a timeline of the process of withdrawal and the introduction of the elements of peace. Between 1993 and 1996, headway was made on some of these legs, but the two parties did not come to a final agreement. What is very clear from what President Hafiz al-Asad has been telling the U.S. government and others, and from what Prime Minister Ehud Barak has announced on a number of occasions, is that there is a mutual desire to see the negotiations resumed. And the Clinton administration will make an effort to see if it can get them resumed.

From 1993 to 1996, there were also negotiations on the Lebanese track, but no significant headway was made in those negotiations, and there have not been negotiations since. There is, however, a monitoring group in Lebanon that is the outgrowth of what is called the April Understanding, an agreement the United States brokered between the parties in 1996. Instead of dealing with peace negotiations, the April Understanding is an agreement that deals with the defusing of tensions and the prevention of an escalation of the ongoing conflict in southern Lebanon. The Israeli prime minister has announced very clearly that he intends to get out of Lebanon within a year, but that he would like to do it through negotiations. Here again the Clinton administration will make an effort to see what can be done.

These are the bilateral tracks. There is a multilateral track as well that was launched at Madrid. It was never seen to be a substitute for bilateral negotiations; the U.S. government knew that if there was to be headway made in the multilaterals, there had to be a serious bilateral process. By the same token, it was also understood that the multilaterals could deal with a set of regional issues integral to creating stability and transforming the region in a way that the bilateral negotiations could not. From 1993 to 1996, working groups were created to discuss the issues of arms control, regional economic development, water, refugees, and the environment. Some of these groups did better than others; however, the important thing is that there were active discussions in all of the working groups. For the last three years, the multilateral process was suspended, but it was not undone.

Work at different, if informal, levels continued. First of all, "Track II" diplomacy which did not really exist in a meaningful way prior to Oslo but which got very serious in the Arab-Israeli and nongovernmental meetings after Oslo has been ongoing. Second, instead of formal meetings of the working groups, there have been informal intersessional meetings that bring Israelis and Arabs together to build databases on issues like water, the environment, and refugees. A certain degree of progress has been made in these meetings, especially in the area of water. What this all means is that an infrastructure for the multilateral process still exists, but it needs to be reenergized.

There is also an infrastructure of relations between the Arab countries and Israel. By 1996, eight members of the Arab League had formed diplomatic relations of one form or another with Israel, and these too were not undone. Like the infrastructure of the multilateral process, these relations were largely frozen. There is, thus, a base from which to work that needs only to be activated.

The United States has for a long time made it clear that its objective in the peace process is to achieve a comprehensive settlement. A comprehensive agreement requires the participation of the broader Arab orbit. As Secretary of State Madeleine Albright once said, the Middle East peace process is not a spectator sport. There are big decisions to be made by a lot of the key players, and the broader Arab orbit has to be involved.

In the coming period, Israel will have very difficult decisions to make. The Palestinians too, will have very difficult decisions to make. Assuming the Syrian and the Lebanese tracks resume, the Syrians and the Lebanese will also have very difficult decisions to make. At a time when difficult decisions are required, the broader Arab world must assume its responsibility. Maybe that means participation in the multilaterals; maybe that means providing additional help especially financial help to the Palestinians; and maybe that means reaching out to Israel and

extending and expanding ties.

If there is to be a new period of serious work, intensity, and energy in promoting peace, all of the tracks bilateral, multilateral, and the economic summit process need to operate. The operation of the tracks will show that everyone is working to change the character of the Middle East and to make comprehensive peace a reality.

Now, how to succeed? One of the keys to the durability of the Israeli-Palestinian track, as well as an incentive to negotiate, has been the absence of an acceptable alternative. But the absence of an acceptable alternative is basically a negative, and negatives do not create the basis for agreements. Positives, not negatives, produce agreements, and positives must be built on a bilateral basis between the parties that are negotiating. As they work together, the parties will see that they can solve problems together. And as they begin to solve problems together, they will build a mutual conviction about each others intentions and about what is possible. When they build that conviction and sense of common purpose, the basis will emerge on which to create the positives and to reach agreements. Even when there is serious engagement, dialogue, and a mutual conviction that whatever the difficulties each side will find a way, it will still take time and will not be easy. There are a variety of reasons why this is the case.

The first reason why the negotiations will take time and be difficult is that this is a historic conflict. And nobody on any side wants to make a historic mistake. On the contrary, each party wants to satisfy itself that it is not giving up more than it has to, and that what it is doing is necessary and justified.

Prime Minister Rabin would tell me privately that, before anything, he had to satisfy himself that what he was doing was in Israels interests. He had to satisfy himself that what he was doing was necessary to reach an agreement. And, he had to satisfy himself that it was worth it and that it was justified. Yet, Yitzhak Rabin was not alone. Every leader who is part of these negotiations will go through that process. They all have to satisfy themselves, and, in their eyes, also satisfy their publics. If they look like they are rushing to agreements, the assessment will be that they gave up more than they needed to. There is not a leader in the region who will want to look that way.

Another reason the negotiations will take time and will need to be intensive and exhaustive is that the differences between the parties are not artificial. They are real. So the parties will have to work through the differences. They will have to engage each other enough to come to an understanding of what each side can and cannot do, and what each side can and cannot accept indeed, what each side can and cannot live with. Only once they have gone through such an intensive and exhaustive process will they begin to develop the creative ideas for bridging their differences. The more they build a level of mutual confidence, and the more they will respect each others needs, interests, and concerns, the more they will be likely to craft those creative solutions.

If there is one area that has been neglected but needs to be worked on between the Israelis and the Palestinians, it is the people-to-people component. There was a people-to-people annex in the Oslo Interim Agreement, but it has not been acted upon. Peace will not last if it is made only by the negotiators and the leaders; peace must also be made by the people, and to do so they must feel the benefits and see the logic of it. The late King Hussein understood the need to build a peace of the people. It was something that motivated and guided him. And he realized that ultimately, as peace is built, the people-to-people dimension must be built as well.

Now, what about the role of the U.S. government? The most important thing the United States can do is to facilitate a relationship between the parties who are negotiating their differences. They are the ones who must negotiate these agreements and find a way to overcome their differences. The fact that the United States cannot negotiate for them does not mean, however, that it will not be active. The United States must be active active by helping with clarifications when inevitable misunderstandings arise, active by insulating the parties against the pressures that crop up, active by offering assurances when they become necessary, active by making suggestions or presenting ideas when they will facilitate progress or help overcome difficulties.

We will be active because it is in our interest to do so. Every administration since that of Harry Trumans has looked at Middle East peace as being in Americas national interest. We, as a country, have our own stake in pursuing the peace process. It is morally right and strategically necessary. Obviously, ending the Arab-Israeli conflict will not mean that all conflicts in the Middle East will end. But if Arab-Israeli peace is produced, the balance of power in the region between the forces of moderation and reason and the forces of extremism who want to turn the clock back will be transformed. And, as a result, this region, so vital internationally, will become far more stable and secure.

At the end of the day, agreements between Israel and the Palestinians and between Israel and Syria and Lebanon are going to be their agreements, and this peace must be their peace. They must own it. They are the ones who must defend it, explain it, stand by it, and believe in what they have done.

What they will find, as they do so, is that the Clinton administration will be with them every step of the way. ❖

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)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)