

Success, Like the Devil, Is in the Details

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One needn't be clairvoyant to know that a weary Bill Clinton, Benjamin Netanyahu and Yasser Arafat will emerge from the confines of Maryland's Eastern Shore to declare their Middle East peace summit a success. After all, presidential summits have to be successes; the alternative is too unpalatable to contemplate. But what, in fact, would constitute success?

At this stage of the peace process, with dozens of items in dispute and the negotiations years behind schedule, there are four possible forms of success: real, virtual, mini and success-lite.

The easiest to recognize is a real success. Its most characteristic feature would be the consummation of a new Israeli-Palestinian agreement that not only ties up all the loose ends from the five-year old Oslo peace accords but that sets guidelines for addressing the the final-status issues. These are the core items of sovereignty over Jerusalem, Jewish settlements, Palestinian refugees and the question of a Palestinian state. Such an agreement might defuse the Palestinians' threat to unilaterally declare an independent state next May if Arafat wins the promise of an eventual state whose borders and powers are defined by Israel.

This would be a historic achievement for both parties. For Arafat, it would mean being president of a universally recognized member of the family of nations. For Netanyahu, it would mean achieving the Zionist goal of world recognition of Israel's veto over the many aspects of Palestinian statehood that threaten Israeli security. Like a real success, a virtual success would look very good on camera and be hailed as a major achievement. But on closer inspection, the fine print would reveal the absence of any real agreement.

A good litmus test is the extent of U.S. involvement. While the U.S. will play a major role in reaching any deal, the greater the U.S. role in executing an agreement, the less likely it represents a true commitment from either side. For example, if Washington has to provide monitors of Palestinian security efforts or if the parties make promises to the president but not to each other, that's another sure sign that there was no firm agreement. A virtual accord is likely to self-destruct in a matter of weeks, probably as a result of increased terrorism.

To the untrained eye, the difference between a mini-success and success-lite is difficult to discern but important. The key is to match the momentous setting with the items on the agenda.

The last time an American president dedicated days of his time to hosting putative Middle Eastern peacemakers,

Jimmy Carter was in the Oval Office and the focus was on the historic opportunity of Egypt-Israel peace. This time, the prespin is that the agenda is much more mundane, the unresolved items from past negotiations. But convening a presidential summit to address a laundry list of disputed details is the diplomatic equivalent of exterminating ants with sarin nerve gas.

In reality, there are three sets of issues to address: small items, medium items and big items. The small items are important, but technical, issues like the opening of a Palestinian airport and seaport in Gaza. The medium items are political disputes from past negotiations: From how much land should Israel "reploy"? How forcefully should Palestinians crack down on extremist opponents of peace? When should the Palestinians finally revoke their charter? What limitations should be placed on Israeli settlement building? The really big items are the final-status issues that will determine the shape of the ultimate resolutions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

If the summit only succeeds in tackling small and medium issues, it will be a positive achievement but a lost opportunity -- i.e., success-lite. But if the summiteers try to address the important stuff, find themselves unable to reach an accord but agree to disagree and rest their laurels on an accord on the minor topics, that qualifies as a mini-success. It's the second-best outcome in a process in which second-best is still good. So, when they light up the victory cigars next week, check out the small print in the text of the agreement. Success, like the devil, is in the details.



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