

Run-Up to the Wye Plantation Peace Summit

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Brief Analysis

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Background on the U.S. Role in the Peace Process. The October Wye Plantation conference underscores the shift in the character of U.S. involvement since the September 1996 clashes that followed the opening of the Hasmonean Tunnel in the Old City of Jerusalem. After this incident, the U.S. role expanded from simple mediator to a member of a triangular process. This new U.S. role led to the January 1998 Hebron Accord. While the Hebron Accord was a major accomplishment because it brought the Likud party to accept the concept of territorial compromise, it was a flawed agreement in its implementation. In the aftermath, no progress was made on further redeployments, security, and the start of final status talks. During this period, the United States became less active on the peace process; Secretary of State Madeleine Albright refused to travel to the region for eight months.

Prompted by a renewal in terrorism in the summer of 1997, Washington became refocused on the Middle East. By January 1998, the United States had come up with a package of ideas to restart the process based on a further redeployment (FRD) from 13 percent of the West Bank. Israeli-U.S. relations became tense over the package, culminating in the London Summit in May when Albright issued the 13 percent "ultimatum." This tactic failed, and Washington turned to a new approach of "lowering the decibel level" with a "ten plus three" proposal -- the 3 percent being a nature reserve -- which led Netanyahu to say "yes." With an agreement won from Netanyahu, the last six weeks have consisted of efforts to get agreement from the Palestinians on security.

The Outlook for October. The three to five days of intensive negotiations will deal with many different facets, such as the security memorandum; FRDs; the PLO Charter; the structure, venue, time and U.S. role in final status talks; and the expiration of the interim period. Success depends on Clinton's ability to pressure Arafat into making security concessions. Clinton will have to wield an "iron fist" just as he wielded his "velvet glove" in recent discussions of new economic and political relations with the Palestinian Authority. Arafat's problem is that if he reaches an agreement,

he validates Netanyahu's security concerns and turns his back on the advice of the Arab world. Netanyahu has already made his concession in that he agreed to the ten plus three plan. Netanyahu is in a strong position to withstand suggestions that he concede on security demands. With upcoming congressional elections, Clinton is unlikely to make that request.

The threat of a Palestinian unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) in May 1999 hangs over the conference. Yet, as of late, some Palestinians have appeared to be reconsidering the merits of a UDI. Palestine Legislative Council speaker Ahmed Qurie (Abu Ala) recently said the principle of a state is not negotiable, but the timing is not definite. The Palestinian fear is that if a state were unilaterally declared, the Palestinians would not be able to attain any more land than they now control. The U.S. position regarding a UDI is ambiguous and therefore unhelpful.

In discussions about a new agreement, the United States proposes to become involved in the day-to-day decision making about the security provisions. This supervision will be so detailed that an editorial on the Fatah website went so far as to claim that Palestinians will find themselves under the rule of U.S. colonialism rather than Israeli colonialism.

If the talks are a success, Netanyahu might be tempted to call for early elections, given his strength and the Labor party's weakness. Unless forced, however, Netanyahu is unlikely to take the risk; his political resilience over the past two years has shown that early elections are probably the only way he can lose his job.

DAVID MAKOVSKY

The Domestic Israeli Implications of the Summit. The Oslo concept of bringing together the Israeli middle and the Palestinian middle against each side's extremes has not really taken force yet. If Netanyahu strikes a deal, however, it will be because he realized that he and the Likud party do not have identical political interests. With the new Israeli election system, Netanyahu has to win more than 50 percent of the vote. In contrast, for the Likud to achieve electoral success requires only 30 percent. This difference of 20 percent is the electorate to whom Netanyahu must cater.

The October summit will force Netanyahu to choose between being a hard bargainer or a hardliner. A decision to accept a pull-back with stringent security terms classifies him as a hard bargainer, and barring unforeseen consequences, gets him reelected. Netanyahu also has an advantage in that he can play the "terror card" both ways to the Israeli public. If there is no terror, then he has stood up to his pre-election promise of security. If there is terror, then he is vindicated for not having made earlier concessions to a "bunch of terrorists." If there is larger scale violence such as an intifada, however, then Netanyahu will suffer politically for causing a situation of no peace and no security.

The Future of the Settlements. An FRD would cause a rupture with the settlers and Netanyahu would lose his right-wing nationalist base. Although no settlements will be evacuated, redeployment will set the precedent for enclaves, accessed by roads under Israeli protection. To affect the fewest settlers, the redeployment will take place from the Jenin area and the area southwest of Hebron, where there are ten small settlements with a total of 1,500 settlers. Without the nature reserve idea, Israel would need to cede land from Beit El and Ofra, just north of Jerusalem and east of Ramallah, to reach the 13 percent figure. In such a case, the number of settlers affected would skyrocket to 5,000, plus the area ceded would be where most of the settler leadership lives. Because Netanyahu did not want to touch this high population of settlers, the compromise became a nature reserve located in the Judean Desert, east of Hebron, but not along the Dead Sea.

Netanyahu had hoped to delay any settlement issue until final status negotiations. The future is now, however, and the writing is on the wall for the settlers. In response, Netanyahu fears that the settlers will run their own first-round candidate in national elections, such as Ze'ev Binyamin Begin, and then stay home on election day. The settlers, who

are passionate by definition, are also capable of the same kind of demonstrations against Netanyahu that they organized against Rabin. The expected appointment of Ariel Sharon as foreign minister may mitigate their opposition, but not indefinitely.

The Outlook for October. The stakes are enormous, and the issues are complicated. The many points that need to be resolved include the nature reserve, the sequencing of the twelve-week period for implementing a deal (both want the other sides' obligations front-loaded), the existence and size of a third pull back, the Gaza Industrial Estates, the Gaza airport, the safe passage between Gaza and the West Bank, the "timeout" in settlement building, the release of prisoners, and the revoking of certain statements in the Palestinian Charter. Also, there is a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for security, which includes elements that will put Arafat on a collision course with Hamas -- for example, putting all mosques under the control of the PA, closing down certain Hamas charities that are conduits of funds to the military wing, and tightening the new Palestinian gun law.

Arafat's health will play a part in the October negotiations as well. U.S. officials believe that he has Parkinson's disease. Arafat might allow his own failing health to pressure himself into a deal, as he wants to be the one to raise the flag over a Palestinian state. Additionally, it might be in the best interest of Israel to make a deal with Arafat in that it might take a successor time to consolidate his position.

The current Israeli coalition is unlikely to be able to sustain a deal and carry on to a final status agreement. Likud and Labor will need to join together combining their capability and willingness, respectively, for a final status deal. Without Likud in the coalition, no government will be able to solve the problem of settlement. The addition of Labor to the government would convince the Palestinians that a better deal is not waiting around the corner.

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