

Clinton Needs Win in Mideast Talks

Oct 8, 1998



Articles & Testimony

The surprise White House meeting Monday of President Bill Clinton, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat calls for both caution and hope.

On the one hand, the meetings themselves were a significant achievement, given that Netanyahu and Arafat had not met for more than a year. On the other hand, the understated Oval Office photo-op presented nothing more substantive than a vague claim of progress and a promise to conduct additional meetings in early and mid-October.

The Israeli-Palestinian peace process has been stalled since January, 1997, when U.S. diplomats won the approval of the two sides to an accord on mutual relations that was largely stillborn. Long-after the date passed for the sides to negotiate the final status of the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem, the parties have remained unable to agree even on many of the supposedly simpler interim issues. Israeli "redeployment" continues to be delayed, cooperation on security issues is stymied and overall relations between Israel and the Palestinians have been deteriorating rather than progressing.

After nine months of trying to bring the sides to agreement on the American proposal of a 13-percent further Israeli redeployment from West Bank land, U.S. officials eagerly took advantage of the opportunities provided by the United Nations General Assembly meeting. The meeting brought Netanyahu and Arafat into close physical proximity to each other and to American officials. The UN setting also focused attention on the potential crisis anticipated on May 4, 1999, the technical end of the interim Oslo accords period, which provided a new and long-needed sense of urgency to the resumption of negotiations. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright engaged in intensive shuttle diplomacy between the two leaders, and met jointly with them. Neither her efforts nor Clinton's meeting with Netanyahu and Arafat resulted in an agreement.

Faced with this continuing stalemate, the Clinton administration took a high-risk, high-return gamble and called for the October summit. If the three leaders had emerged from the Clinton-Netanyahu-Arafat meeting announcing an agreement on "interim issues," it would have been hailed as a great success. The same will not be true if they come out of the October sessions with that alone. Clinton and Albright must have been impressed with the intentions of Netanyahu and Arafat to invite them back for intensive meetings next month, since a failure to agree on an interim deal at the October meetings would be viewed as a resounding failure. But more will be necessary for these high-profile meetings to be viewed as successful.

The high profile of the upcoming summit puts additional pressure on the administration. To be worth their weight, these sessions must go beyond the redeployment agreement in two ways. First, they need to resolve finally the laundry list of outstanding issues, such as Palestinian passage between the West Bank and Gaza, thus paving the way for "final-status talks" to begin. Second, they must begin to address in earnest the questions posed by the May 4 end of the interim period and Arafat's plan to declare an independent state should one not come about as a product of negotiations by then.

Arafat is constrained from backing down on his promise to declare statehood unless he has face saving and

substantive achievements to present to his public. Similarly, Netanyahu cannot present his supporters with a deal that doesn't ensure better security guarantees than the Labor government was offering, considering that both sides are predicting violent conflict next May.

The intensive trilateral meetings planned for mid-October offer great potential to put the peace process back on track and create enough positive momentum to carry the parties safely past the May 4 deadline. They also present a risk of contributing to the sense of despair that has become a prominent feature of the peace process.

Over the next few weeks, the real pressure will be on Clinton, who has given himself a deadline to achieve a major breakthrough with the parties. While elements of a deal will be politically unpalatable for both Arafat and Netanyahu, ending the summit with no deal would be politically disastrous for Clinton.



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