

Israeli Outlook (Part I): Israel and the Peace Process

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Before Israel's elections last May, Washington warned that the peace process could fail under the leadership of a Likud-led coalition. No one expected that nine months later, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's government would have established almost daily contact with the Palestinian Authority (PA) and its head, Yasser Arafat, redeployed from Hebron, released Palestinian prisoners, and planned the first further redeployment from the West Bank. Likewise, few would have predicted that Israel's reciprocity demands-e.g., changing the Palestinian charter and extraditing Palestinian terrorists-which were central to Netanyahu's campaign would have been downplayed in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations to the extent that they have been.

Netanyahu has "courageously" moved toward the center of the political spectrum with regard to the peace process, despite resistance by his own coalition members. Today his most avid supporters during the campaign have become the most resistant to his implementation of the Oslo accords. Netanyahu, however, will find subsequent decisions more difficult because the most emotional-and therefore most troubling-issues have been left to the final status talks.

The peace process will only continue if the Palestinians and Israelis have realistic expectations that satisfy both parties. In the past, Israeli governments have attempted to negotiate from impractical demands: a new, peaceful Middle East without borders or a West Bank under full territorial control of the Israelis. But today, those expectations have changed and the Israeli public currently has very realistic political objectives. The majority of Israelis want secure borders (including the Jordan Valley), control of the majority of settlements in strategic areas, Jerusalem as the united capital, and access to water resources in the occupied territories. Maps of strategic areas drawn by Yossi Beilin and Abu Mazen, Yossi Beilin and Michael Eitan, the Israeli Defense Forces, and centrist parties are surprisingly similar. With each additional step in the peace process, however, it will be necessary to broaden the national consensus by increasing the number of parties in the coalition (possibly through a national unity government) or garnering a greater constituency for those parties already in the government.

On the other hand, the PA does not have realistic expectations. Arafat assumed that the Palestinians would receive 90 percent of the West Bank in the three further redeployments outlined in the Oslo II agreement and would be able to negotiate over the last 10 percent during final status talks. Therefore, Arafat would have been disappointed and insulted with any further redeployment constituting less than 25 to 30 percent of the West Bank. But Israeli ministers felt that they were being overly generous by offering to redeploy from 9 percent. The PA's abstract, extremist dreams and the gap between Israeli and Palestinian expectations have caused an impasse in Palestinian-Israeli negotiations adding to the conflict over Har Homa.

Har Homa

The challenge for every democratic leader is how to make leadership decisions while maintaining a national consensus. Netanyahu can not lose touch with public opinion nor be constricted by prevailing attitudes. The previous Labor government was not re-elected precisely because it failed to retain public opinion. In order to appease the national consensus, starting construction at Har Homa immediately after the Hebron agreement was essential. Har Homa is a barren hill located between two existing Jewish neighborhoods within the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem. Jews own 75 percent of the land, Arabs 15 percent and the Church 10 percent. Legal aspects of the project were concluded when Yitzhak Rabin was prime minister and today there is broad support, cutting across party lines, for building on Har Homa. Every prime minister since Golda Meir has built in Jerusalem and Israel would never agree to forbid construction within what it considers its own borders.

Construction at Har Homa is directly related to the status of the peace process. The only way for Netanyahu to stop building in Jerusalem and keep his coalition together would be to stop the peace process. Because the core of his constituency strongly disagreed with the Hebron agreement, Netanyahu could not afford to alienate his coalition partners further by halting construction. Moreover, Arafat has threatened violence in order to stop the Har Homa project and Israel cannot engage in negotiations under these conditions.

Future Negotiations

As long as Arafat's high expectations were being met by the Israelis, a modicum of trust and cooperation was established between the two sides and the peace process continued. But as more difficult issues, such as the

status of Jerusalem and Israeli security, are raised, the gap between Arafat's expectations and Israeli security concerns causes greater tensions and disappointments on both sides. The majority of the Israeli public is ready to give Palestinians almost every right except the right to destroy Israel. However, peaceful relations do not necessarily protect the Israeli public, as evidenced by the March 13 shooting of Israeli schoolchildren by a Jordanian soldier at the "Island of Peace." This tragedy reinforced the Israeli desire to maintain control of their security.

During negotiations for the Hebron agreement, the Israelis promised to implement the first further redeployment without reciprocal actions by the Palestinians. Many Israeli ministers protested, however, and insisted on including demands for reciprocity in future negotiations, as outlined in the U.S. "Note for the Record," attached to the Hebron accord. Netanyahu's government will not be able to continue the further redeployments or the peace process without corresponding efforts by the Palestinians. Already Arafat has scoffed that he will not change the Palestinian charter until Israel ratifies a constitution, and the PA has released Hamas leaders from prison. Given this reaction, it is no wonder that Israelis are questioning the future of the peace process.

Instead of concentrating on further redeployments, Israel should develop a viable strategy and begin negotiations on final status talks as soon as possible. If Israel and the PA wait too long, trust will be completely destroyed. The most useful U.S. role would be to curb the use of Palestinian threats, preserve lines of communication, and guide expectations into a more realistic framework.

This Special Policy Forum report was prepared by Rachel E. Ingber.