



Middle East Peace Talks: Lessons from the First Round

A Video FAQ with Ambassador Dennis Ross, Counselor
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Are there signs of progress?

DENNIS ROSS: It's very difficult to determine that there's any progress being made at this point, but I don't think that should be particularly surprising. The critical question is not whether we're going to see real progress in these talks emerge very soon. I think that would be a false expectation. These are talks about permanent status. You're not going to have some immediate measure of that changing on the core issues. The real question is, How are the parties deciding which issues they're going to address in what order and in what relationship? There's presumably always been a sense that there's a relationship, for example, between borders and security – that's an obvious relationship. But it may not be the place to start. The place to get at those two issues might, for example, be can you come to a common definition of “blocs?”

The two sides have a different concept of what settlement blocs are. For the Israelis, they are a geographic area that is somewhat broader in dimensions because you're not simply identifying: “Here's a settlement area and we're going to draw a line to it.” You're saying “How do we secure that area?” And so the security is an important factor that relates to the shape of settlement blocs. Palestinians might want to define the blocs in a much more simple way, but it's precisely because of other considerations that come into play that you need to have some conceptual understanding of what is the definition of a bloc. Starting there, I think, would be very useful because it doesn't require you to get at the border immediately, which makes it easier to avoid an issue like Jerusalem. If you're really talking about borders, you can't really avoid Jerusalem because it's part of the geographic definition of where the border's going to be. But if you focus on blocs to begin with, you don't have to take on that harder question up front and yet you begin to deal with an important issue related to the territory and you begin to deal with an important issue related to security.

What helpful steps could the parties take?

DENNIS ROSS: If you're going to show to the respective publics that something is different this time, there needs to be a different kind of public communication between the two sides – even if they're protecting the content of the talks, which if exposed prematurely will probably undercut them each from a political standpoint and produce a backlash.

I would hope that within the first two months of the talks something would begin to emerge. Maybe, coordinated public statements that would show that they're responding to each other on day-to-day life, on how they deal with each other. You have a basic asymmetry between the two sides in many respects. One is that Palestinians perceive the Israelis in a very tangible way as not being committed to two states because they build in what they think should be the Palestinian state, because they control different aspects of Palestinians' lives. Those are very tangible questions, issues. The question is, could the Israelis do something that demonstrates that, in fact, things are changing in that respect. So maybe they build only in the blocs, maybe they open up Area C to economic activity. Same thing for the Israelis: They need to see something from the Palestinians. For the Israelis, what they see is something much more intangible. They don't see genuine Palestinian acceptance of Israel and they need to see some signs of that. Are Palestinians prepared to say "two states for two peoples," something that they haven't been prepared to do up until now. Are Palestinians prepared to somehow acknowledge the historic Jewish connection to the land and to Jerusalem, something the Israelis haven't seen up until now.

What is the U.S. role in the talks?

DENNIS ROSS: While the talks take place bilaterally, each side then briefs Martin Indyk, who is our negotiator. And also, I think, there are times when there are three-way meetings. It isn't just bilateral meetings and bilateral briefings, there are three-way meetings. It gives, I think, the United States a very clear window into what's going on and it puts the United States in a position where it could be making suggestions and I think the character of those suggestions will probably change over time. More limited to begin with, but maybe more significant over time.

Have events in Egypt changed the picture for negotiators?

DENNIS ROSS: I don't think fundamentally they have changed the calculus for why you're pursuing negotiations with the Palestinians. They're a reminder that you're surrounded by uncertainty and turmoil, but they're also a reminder that you don't want that to be the case for the Palestinians as well. If you're Abu Mazen and you see the Muslim Brotherhood, basically not only out of power in Egypt, but also in a sense being decapitated in Egypt, it means that the Muslim Brotherhood as a force, which would be a force of rejection, because it fundamentally rejects the idea of peace with Israel, would be a force designed to mobilize a backlash to any moves you make toward peace, it could only improve the Palestinian position as Abu Mazen defines it.