



BULLETIN

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Against All Odds But One: New Round of Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations

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American persistence in efforts to push the Middle East peace process forward is the only factor that does not allow for immediate disregard of the recently restarted Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The EU should be alarmed, however, by the absence of a representative of their interests at the outset of negotiations. Regardless of the declarations made by parties at the restart of talks, the first test will come on 26 September when the Israeli government decides on the extension of the moratorium on settlement building in the West Bank.

After 20 months of almost complete deadlock followed by intense American engagement, the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations were officially restarted in Washington on 2 September. The talks, mediated by the U.S., are expected to last a year and lead to an agreement on all final status issues: borders, settlements, the status of Jerusalem, refugees and security. As a result of their first direct encounter, the parties agreed to meet again in mid-September and then every fortnight on a regular basis.

In the 20 years of history of the so-called Middle East peace process, and after the failure of Bill Clinton's parameters plan in Camp David in 2000 in particular, there have been many restarts. To assess the possibilities for a negotiated agreement within the next year, the focus should be on the differences (if any) distinguishing the present attempt from the past ones.

On the liabilities side there is the ubiquitous and possibly unprecedented skepticism articulated by the experts and diplomats. The circumstances on the ground do not converge with any idea for a negotiated peace agreement that the US or international community may have or has ever pondered. It was blatantly demonstrated by two incidents preceding the restart of negotiations: two attacks claimed by Hamas on Israelis in the West Bank that killed four and injured two Israelis on the one hand, and the influential rabbi Ovadia Yosef's remarks wishing death to president Abbas on the other.

Israel. The Israeli prime minister needs negotiations to revitalise the Israeli-American relations and boost his country's faltering image internationally. These are the sole reasons for Prime Minister Netanyahu agreeing for the restart of talks. At the same time his predominantly right-wing coalition would most likely split over any concession made to the Palestinians. Historically, the two right-wing prime ministers who lost office, having given in to American pressure on the Palestinian issue, were Yitzhak Shamir in 1992 and Netanyahu himself in 1999 after the Wye River memorandum. It is only natural to expect that Netanyahu would not want to make the same "mistake" again. Additionally, if Kadima refused to save Netanyahu and join Likud in an event of a coalition breakup, the radicalization of Israeli society, with the peace camp politically almost nonexistent, would most likely lead to another victory for the right, possibly also the extreme right.

The Palestinians. The Palestinian side is not only split along Fatah-Hamas lines but there are frictions within PLO as well. A significant part of Fatah and many Palestinian NGOs do not support the recently initiated talks. President Abbas therefore stand for only a faction of the Palestinian political and societal elite. In fact, neither Abbas nor other Arab guests invited to Washington (president Mubarak and king Abdullah) represent the conflicted parties in the broader Arab-Israeli strife—both Egypt and Jordan have peace treaties with Israel, unlike for example Saudi Arabia, Syria or Lebanon. Hamas, however, is the greatest absentee of all. Even in the first quarter of 2010 there were still efforts underway to engage Hamas in a smart way by means of Germany-mediated talks on

the release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit or informal meetings of European and American citizens with Hamas officials. With Fatah and Israeli pressure however, the U.S. abandoned plans to facilitate intra-Palestinian reconciliation. It does not bode well for the implementation of any future peace agreement, which will have to be recognized by Hamas. Its exclusion emboldens the hardline faction, further postponing the possibility of moderating Hamas as a whole. On the positive side, diplomats and Middle Eastern experts in Washington argue that the security situation in the West Bank has improved greatly over the past two years and praise the efficiency with which prime minister Fayyad put his plan of state institution building into practice.

The US. The sense of urgency on the part of the American administration falls in the asset column as the only positive factor that differentiates this round of negotiations from the previous ones. President Obama's commitment so far can only be compared to that of George H. W. Bush and Secretary Baker in 1991. Through arcane diplomacy, Obama has facilitated direct negotiations—a situation hardly imaginable when he took office in January 2009, in the aftermath of the Gaza war. His personal commitment has visibly increased since the military establishment took stance on the Middle East peace process at the beginning of 2010. Gen. David Petraeus, then in charge of CENTCOM, testified before the Senate Armed Forces Committee in March that “insufficient progress toward a comprehensive Middle East peace” was the first “root cause of instability” in the broader Middle East. It was probably a turning point when the Obama administration became convinced of the negative impact that the Arab-Israeli conflict has on American interests in the region.

Another factor that affirms Obama administration's perseverance in pursuit of peace in the Middle East is the fact that it is willing to pressure Israel, as well as Palestinians, before important mid-term congressional elections in November, regardless of the lobbyists' influence. Additionally, recent surveys show that both leaders—Abbas and Netanyahu—are still relatively popular (>50% according to the Palestine Center for Policy and Survey Research and Ha'aretz-Tel Aviv University respectively) vis-a-vis declining support for Obama in the Arab world (16%—2010 Arab Public Opinion Poll) and domestically (46%—Gallup). Approval ratings indicate yet another reason for Obama's determination to pursue an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. Such success, together with the withdrawal of US combat forces from Iraq, would account for an important image boost before the next presidential elections.

Both parties see American administration's determination to reach an understanding in the agreed timeframe—Obama himself has indicated he would put his weight behind the negotiations, which means that he would participate in tripartite meetings and it is understood that his team would come forward with a peace proposal if the parties are unable to breach gaps themselves. This may however incite the Palestinians to seek engagement by Obama as early as possible and therefore stall progress in the bilateral talks.

The EU. One actor conspicuously missing from the talks in Washington is the European Union, which has allocated more than 3 billion euro in aid for the Palestinians and would also be the financial founder of the Palestinian state. The fact that the Quartet representative Tony Blair was present at the outset of negotiations in Washington gave Catherine Ashton, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, an opportunity to shun away from them. Despite personal invitation by the US Special Envoy For Middle East Peace George Mitchell, she visited China instead. These developments should cause alert in the EU member states, as the progress in the Middle East peace process is in their vital interest because of regional proximity, the amount of money invested, vast Muslim minorities in European countries and the fact that appr. 40% of energy resources are imported from the broader Middle East.

Before it is known where the talks eventually lead to, their fate may be sealed on 26 September when the moratorium on Israeli settlement building expires. There are three scenarios for the nearest future: if the Israeli government extends the moratorium, which is unlikely, the talks will continue. If it does not, there is a danger that the Palestinians can leave the negotiating table. However, a strong pressure from the Americans should prevent this scenario from happening, and the most probable outcome is the continuation of the talks, with the weakened Palestinian side on board.

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