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Contemplating a Substantive Change in the Palestinian Position on a Political Agreement: Possible Israeli Responses

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Introduction

Far from the eyes of the media and for the most part discreetly, Israeli-Palestinian negotiations are underway. The United States is apparently present at some of the discussions, serving in a “supervisory” role over the Israeli and Palestinian positions. According to information that has not yet been officially confirmed, discussions on the issue of borders will soon begin in the presence of US General John Allen.

The prevailing opinion in Israel and among many American and Palestinian officials is that chances are slim that the current dialogue will lead to a real breakthrough that will promote a full settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. Gaps between the respective positions are wide, and the mediator – i.e., the United States – is seen as lacking sufficient leverage to lead the two sides to modify their positions significantly. Yet while the assessment is reasonable, powerful considerations could in fact lead the two parties to decide to make a material change in their positions. This article examines the possibility that a fundamental and perhaps even dramatic change will occur in the familiar Palestinian position, and examines possible responses by the US administration and the Israeli government.

The Background to a Possible Change

Several considerations could lead the Palestinian Authority (PA) toward a substantive change in its traditional positions on the issue of a settlement. The first concerns a Palestinian assessment of the US administration’s ability to dictate terms for a settlement that are not acceptable to Israel. During President Obama’s first term it became clear that his administration’s ability to force Israel to act against what it sees as a national interest, namely, continued construction in the settlements, is limited.

It has also become clear to the PA that the Obama administration is intentionally avoiding linkage between Israel’s positions on the issue of a settlement and bilateral relations with

Israel. Furthermore, the Palestinian leadership was disappointed by the administration's position on upgrading the Palestinian Authority's status in the United Nations, and thus the PA's apparent hopes that the Obama administration would impose on Israel a settlement favorable to the Palestinians were dashed.

The Arab world, likewise perceived as another supporter of the PA in its struggle to obtain a political settlement with Israel, has been shown in recent years to be a fair weather friend. Major Arab countries – e.g., Egypt, Syria – are undergoing powerful and historic upheavals, and their international status has suffered a harsh blow. Other countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Lebanon, are contending with serious threats from within and without, and it is doubtful that they have significant ability to help the Palestinians achieve their national goals. In addition, the events in Egypt have led to a considerable weakening in the standing of Hamas, which was sorely limiting the PA's political room to maneuver. Under these circumstances the PA might feel freer to adopt more moderate positions.

In the meantime, construction in the settlements continues, in spite of some restrictions Israel has placed on itself – apparently with some coordination with the US administration – concerning the scope and location of the building. The widespread impression that right wing tendencies among the Israeli public are growing and that the left is weakening could lead the PA to conclude that Israel might continue to expand the settlement enterprise in the foreseeable future. The current peace process appears to be a personal whim of US Secretary of State John Kerry and thus far has not earned substantive backing from the President. The crisis over the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons and the threat of an American strike against Syria could lead to a Palestinian assessment that President Obama's standing is weakening and in the coming months international attention will be focused on Syria. This could push the Palestinians toward a settlement, even a limited one, with Israel.

The obvious conclusion from the PA's point of view is that it may currently be facing a historic decision of “to be or not to be,” specifically, a final opportunity to fulfill the vision of two states for two peoples.

Possible Characteristics of Change

The Palestinians are not likely to go so far as to adopt positions that are close to those of Israel. However, it is certainly possible that they would adopt positions acceptable to the US that would lead the administration to demand that Israel yield something measurable in exchange. For example, the Palestinians might announce to the US government that they are prepared to pledge – most likely in secret – that the PA will consent to a certain formula that might satisfy the Israeli demand that the PA recognize Israel as the nation

state of the Jewish people and/or an agreement on terminating the conflict, if and when there is agreement on the settlement in its entirety. Or, the PA might agree, under the above conditions, that the right of return would apply mainly to the Palestinian state to be established, on the basis of an understanding that over the years, Israel would be prepared to take in a limited number of Palestinian refugees. Or, the PA might make it clear that it is prepared to consider favorably an agreement on security arrangements proposed by the US military delegation that has been examining this issue with Israel in recent months.

Possible Israeli Responses

If in fact the above scenarios materialize, either individually or in some combination, President Obama will likely abandon the quiet passivity he has recently adopted concerning the Middle East peace process. He will likely aspire to be intensively involved in achieving a settlement, and the fact that he is now in his second term will give him a freer hand vis-à-vis Israel. There is no doubt that he will want to leave his historical mark as the man who succeeded in bringing about a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which was a flagship issue in his first term.

Beyond this, the threatening moves made by the European Union against Israel concerning the ongoing construction in the territories could help the President create an international front to exert heavy pressure on Israel to offer a conciliatory platform in exchange for the more flexible Palestinian position. For example, the administration might demand that Israel present the map of its borders at the opening stage. Another possibility is that the administration demands that Israel agree to hold discussions on the basis of the 1967 lines and the possibility of territorial exchanges.

If – and this is a big "if" – this situation comes about, Prime Minister Netanyahu would face difficult and far-reaching decisions on both the national and the personal levels. In his party, there is a group of ministers and Knesset members with considerable political clout who strongly oppose any concessions to the PA beyond gestures such as releasing additional prisoners and perhaps even freezing construction in the territories for a limited time and in limited areas. If there were a willingness to make further concessions, this would almost certainly lead them to demand that the party institutions be convened immediately for the purpose of making decisions that would restrict the Prime Minister's room to maneuver. Netanyahu would need to take into account the shocks to his current coalition, although these would be relatively insignificant in terms of the stability of the government, since if the right wing religious party HaBayit HaYehudi were to leave the coalition, this would enable the entry of the moderate Labor party.

On a personal level, Netanyahu would have to take into account that political moves toward a settlement would seriously damage his credibility. Over the years, he has been

extremely critical of prime ministers who sold the public one agenda and implemented an opposing agenda when they reached office. He was elected on the basis of a right wing platform, and it will be difficult for him to explain why he is abandoning these principles. In such circumstances, the prime minister could decide to dissolve the coalition and hold elections, with the agreement as the central issue. If that happened, the elections could be seen as a referendum.

Netanyahu would probably seek to create linkage between his willingness to make concessions to the Palestinians and American willingness to act against Iran and/or “permission” from the US government for Israel to act against Iran, with an assurance of US backing in the event of serious anti-Israel backlash. The Obama administration might consent to this if it believes that by failing to consent to this linkage it could cause the peace process to fail. In such a case, Netanyahu is far more likely to respond positively to the administration’s demands in the Palestinian context.

