



ISRAEL-PALESTINE: NEW LEADERSHIP NEEDED

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With rumors of Israeli–Palestinian negotiations on the verge of restarting, a closer examination of the Israeli political situation and the intentions and calculations of the current government shows that such a development is unlikely to materialize in the near future.

On April 17 Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad was scheduled to meet with his Israeli counterpart Binyamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem to hand over a letter outlining the Palestinian positions regarding a peace settlement with Israel. The meeting was to be the first official encounter between the two leaders and the highest-level meeting between the two sides since September 2010. In a protracted conflict with a peace process in deadlock for years, this meeting was interpreted by some as the long-awaited start to renewed talks and possibly an agreement. Indeed, the Israeli Prime Minister's Office issued a statement saying that Netanyahu was planning to upgrade the talks to direct negotiations with President Mahmoud Abbas. However, Fayyad did not show up at the meeting but sent Saeb Erekat, the Palestinian chief negotiator. More than a sign of failed public diplomacy between the two sides, this was further proof that direct talks between the two sides are unlikely to take place in the near future; and even if they do, such talks will most likely fail to bring the two sides any closer to an agreement.

Early Elections in Israel?

Negotiating with the Palestinians is a controversial issue in Israel. While polls show that a majority of Israelis are in favor of a two-state solution achieved through negotiations, opinions differ strongly on what agreements can be made and when. There is a constant trade-off between security concerns and the willingness to make concessions. Any government entering into negotiations with the Palestinians must be willing and able to make sacrifices that may not sit well with large segments of the population. Several factors imply that the current government is not in such a flexible position.

In Israel, speculations are circulating that the coalition

government led by Netanyahu might dissolve, prompting early elections sometime this year. Parliamentary elections, legislated to be held every four years, are not due until late 2013. However, in Israel most governments fall prematurely. The average term for Israeli prime ministers in recent decades has been shorter than three years. As such, the current government is unlikely to jeopardize its stability or support base by making controversial concessions to the Palestinian side.

There are a number of reasons why Netanyahu would like early elections to take place. He has enjoyed high levels of popular support in recent months and has a strong incentive to hold the elections now rather than in 2013. His popularity significantly increased following the release of captured soldier Gilad Shalit in October 2011. Shalit had been imprisoned by Hamas for over five years and his liberation in exchange for the release of large numbers of Palestinian prisoners was supported by a vast majority of Israelis. Furthermore, the Iranian nuclear crisis as well as the general instability in the region is working in favor of the current governing coalition by making national security and stability top priorities for the Israeli public. Netanyahu is now enjoying a strong backing within his party and the country at large. In the Likud party primaries on March 27, the prime minister won by a landslide against his sole competitor. Recent election polls give the Likud 32 seats in the Knesset, an increase on the 27 seats it currently holds, making it by far the largest party and giving the nationalist camp a simple majority of 66 out of the total 120 seats in parliament.

A Divided Opposition

The current weaknesses and fragmentation of the political opposition also affect the prime minister's considerations to push for early elections. In January 2011, the Labor Party



split and its former leader and current Defense Minister Ehud Barak broke off and established the Independence Party. His move was criticized for being an attempt to secure his place in the government while leaving the opposition fragmented. Last September, the Labor Party elected Shelly Yachimovich as its new leader. The question remains whether she will be able to revive her party after several prominent figures followed Barak to his newly formed faction.

Furthermore, in March the former opposition leader and head of the Kadima party, Tzipi Livni lost her party primaries to former Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz. The party, the largest in the Knesset with 28 seats, understandably needs time to garner support for the new leader before elections. According to a poll conducted after the election of Mofaz, Kadima would now only gain 15 seats.

The upcoming U.S. presidential elections also play a part in the calculations. Netanyahu probably wants to avoid facing elections at the end of next year as if President Obama is reelected he will likely exert even more pressure on Israel to give up land to the Palestinians. Logically, Netanyahu would prefer to have the elections done and dusted and a strong grip on power.

Yet, even without early elections, the government is unlikely to make any bold moves that may compromise its support base. Any bold move, such as freezing construction on the West Bank, would create ripples in the party's support base. Generally speaking, the current governing coalition does not offer Netanyahu much support for engaging in negotiations with the Palestinians. Both his own party, Likud, and the second-largest party in government, Yisrael Beiteinu, are known for emphasizing security concerns, thereby garnering support, at the expense of advancing the peace process.

Under these settings, any peace process requires both parties involved in the conflict to realize that the costs of continuing the conflict exceed the costs of making the sacrifices necessary to reach an agreement. And while the true intentions of the Palestinian leadership can be debated, its current

predicament clearly presents an impediment to the peace process. The main obstacle is the split between Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza. No two-state solution can be achieved before this rift is resolved. Unfortunately, last year's unity deal was mainly directed at creating an image of a unified front rather than being proof of true reconciliation. Moreover, President Abbas is deemed by many as lacking the mandate to negotiate a deal with the Israelis. Since his presidential term expired in 2009, Abbas now only has backing from a few loyalists within his party. His weaknesses, coupled with the high degree of controversy associated with negotiating with the Israelis, will prevent him from playing a large role in advancing the peace process.

The Need for New Leadership

According to the 2011 Peace Index, only 32 percent of Israelis believed that negotiations with the Palestinian Authority would lead to peace in the coming years. Unfortunately, the Israeli public's disillusionment with the peace process is not unwarranted. For the peace process to advance, new leaders ready to make bold moves and with strong public support need to be put in place on both sides. Based on its ideology and agenda, Israel's center-left opposition has a better chance than the current nationalist coalition of reaching an agreement with the Palestinians. However, the opposition needs to be allowed time to grow stronger in order to present a viable alternative to the current government and hopefully form a coalition that is ready to face its neighbors and start negotiating.

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