

Mr. President, Don't Pray for Anything You Really Don't Want

Direct talks between Israelis and Palestinians could be a political trap for Obama.

BY AARON DAVID MILLER | JULY 28, 2010



Barack Obama's administration has been lobbying Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Arab governments hard to return to direct talks with Israel for the first time in several years. That decision could be made as early as Thursday, when the Arab League meets to discuss the matter. But Obama should very careful what he wishes for.

One of the most enduring myths in the lore surrounding Arab-Israeli diplomacy is that direct negotiations provide the key to successful peacemaking.

They don't.

The actual history of negotiations tells a far different story. Direct talks are often necessary, but have never been sufficient to ensure success. And Benjamin Netanyahu's government, together with the Obama administration, should stop raising expectations and deluding themselves and the rest of us into thinking otherwise.

Israelis and Palestinians will certainly have to negotiate directly and own their peace process, but even with a strong American role -- one that is well thought through and well-timed, the odds against a conflict-ending accord remain long indeed. The Obama administration should be very careful that in its hurry to get direct talks going, it doesn't spark an Israeli-Palestinian crisis that makes that fact all too painfully clear.

On first glance, the logic of direct negotiations is powerful, if not unassailable. Only through face-to-face talks can trust and confidence be built, problems solved, and decisions made by each side on what price it is willing to pay for an agreement. This is especially true for Israelis and Palestinians when the issues on the table -- Jerusalem, borders, and refugees -- cut to the core of their respective political identities and physical security. The very nature of directness suggests an intimacy and reassurance that is critical to persuading each side that the other is serious.

The only problem with this argument is that there is scant evidence to support it in the history of Arab-Israeli peacemaking. Every successful agreement that has endured -- save one -- came not as a result of sustained direct talks but from heavy-duty U.S. mediation. In fact, in each of the three breakthroughs in Arab-Israeli peacemaking -- Henry Kissinger's disengagement agreements following the October 1973 war (1973-75); Jimmy Carter's Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty (1979); and George H.W. Bush's and James Baker's Madrid Peace Conference (1991), there were no sustained direct talks at all. The United States brokered, shuttled, and mediated between the sides.

The only example of direct negotiations actually producing a lasting agreement was the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty (1994) -- and here, circumstances were so

unusual, the level of Israeli-Jordanian contacts and confidence so deep, and the issues on the table so much more tractable than the ones we face today, that it was truly the exception to the rule.

The cruel irony, of course, is that the poster child for direct talks -- the 1993 Oslo process, in which Israelis and Palestinians did everything themselves -- collapsed in a wave of violence, bitterness, and mutual recrimination, partly because there was no third party to help them solve their problems. By the time the United States got involved in the Oslo negotiations, the process was already on life support and soon to expire.

Fast-forward to today. Against this background and given the huge gaps between Israel and the Palestinians on the core issues, the urgency for direct talks is indeed curious. Israel's interest in direct negotiations is perhaps understandable. As the stronger party, the Israelis would like to edge the Americans out and try to deal directly with the Palestinians without a babysitter. Whether or not the Netanyahu government is prepared to deal seriously with the Palestinians, this has always been the preferred Israeli approach.

Obama's interest is another matter. Does the president really believe that putting these two sides together now will lead to progress, or to an agreement on the tough issues like Jerusalem? Direct talks may, of course, provide Netanyahu with cover to renew the moratorium on settlement activity when it expires late September. Still, direct negotiations will sooner rather than later lead to an impasse and an Israeli-Palestinian crisis, particularly if Israel continues its unilateral actions on the ground, particularly in Jerusalem.

The only conceivable purpose of direct talks now would be to provide clarity. And clarity when you can't reach a deal is not always a good thing. These discussions are bound to expose just how large the gaps are between Israel and the Palestinians, and who is serious about actually reaching an agreement and who isn't. It will also challenge Obama to show just how serious *he* is about Israeli-Palestinian peace. Does the president really want such a moment of truth this fall,

when neither side is prepared to pay the price for an accord, when he has so much else on his plate, and the November midterm elections will create additional problems?

The arc of this peace process was always going to end with American ideas or even a U.S. plan. Weak leaders, big gaps, and painful decisions all but ensured it. There are no Anwar Sadats, Yitzhak Rabins, or King Husseins -- far-sighted leaders of stature who can take bold steps to rescue the peace process and make matters easier for the American mediator. And it's arguable whether an American president, no matter how transformative he thinks he is, can compensate with his own urgency and leadership if it doesn't exist in the region. Still, Obama wants a solution: He pushed hard for a negotiating process from the beginning of his presidency, and now he'll have to assume even greater responsibility and deliver -- at a minimum with bridging proposals or even a U.S. initiative on the core issues -- if direct talks don't produce.

Direct negotiations? Don't pray for anything you really don't want, Mr. President. But if you really want them, get ready; the time to earn your Nobel Peace Prize may be right around the corner.

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