

CARROTS AND STICKS MAY NOT BE GOOD ENOUGH

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After five months of discussions, the Israeli Palestinian peace talks are once again on hold. Despite the strong motivation of all those involved, including the third party, grounded in fear of the collapse of Abbas's regime and the West Bank falling into the hands of Hamas extremists, a viable peace agreement remains beyond reach.

The parties' dialogue, conducted through the proximity talks and direct negotiations, has changed almost nothing. The Palestinians are once again posing preconditions for the renewal of the negotiations: They blame Netanyahu for the failure of the process, claiming that the Israeli Prime Minister is more interested in prolonging negotiations than making decisions. Netanyahu still does not believe that Abbas will be able to agree to end the conflict and settle all the Palestinian demands. Between them is a powerful mediator who employs almost every conceivable manipulation strategy, and is apparently motivated to drive the process forward at all costs, even though the parties clearly do not see eye to eye on each other's needs.

The proximity talks held between May and August this year failed to produce any real progress. Despite US administration reports to the public on the "successful talks" in the direct negotiations, no substantial progress was made on either procedural or substantive (core) issues such as borders, security, refugees, and Jerusalem. What was supposed to be a problem-solving process turned out to be dominated by accusations and mistrust, and characterized by sharp differences in the parties' approaches to the problem.

Since Netanyahu's electoral victory, the Palestinians have posed new preconditions for any dialogue or negotiations. After Netanyahu complied with most of these conditions and declared his approval of a two-state solution and a 10-month freeze on construction in the settlements, the Palestinians wasted six of the these 10 months by refusing to initiate a dialogue since the freeze did not include Jerusalem. Immediately at the beginning of the direct negotiations, the Palestinians blamed Netanyahu for dragging his feet and refusing to continue negotiations from the understandings reached with former Prime Minister Olmert in the previous round of talks. The Palestinians threatened to terminate the negotiations if the construction freeze at the end of October. They kept their word and terminated the talks at the end of last month— but now refuse to renew the negotiations without a freeze on constructions in all settlements including Jerusalem.

But the difficulties are much deeper than the disagreement on the construction freeze. The main obstacle concerns the parties' incompatible interests. While both parties recognize the need to establish a Palestinian

state, they each envision a different way to make it serve their interests. This is reflected in the disagreement on the agenda of the negotiations, which makes it difficult to achieve any substantial progress in the discussions. The Palestinians, who apparently received a promise from Obama's administration that a viable Palestinian state would be established within a year, want to discuss all the issues (i.e. borders, water, security, refugees, Jerusalem, and the release of prisoners), starting with borders. The Israelis, whose interests in the process were (and still are) security and recognition, prefer to discuss security first. According to Netanyahu, Israel has two conditions for an agreement: security arrangements (stemming from his fear that the establishment of Palestinian state could lead to increasing terrorism) and recognition of Israel as a Jewish state. According to Netanyahu, the root of the conflict—and therefore its solution—is the refusal to recognize the rights of the Jewish people to a state. Without addressing this issue, no end to the conflict is possible. In order to renew negotiations, Netanyahu even offered to renew the construction freeze in exchange for Palestinian recognition of Israel. The Palestinians refused, insisting that the freeze is a condition for the peace talks and cannot be linked to recognition.

These last few weeks, the Americans have been working very hard to tailor a package deal that will allow the parties to sit down at the negotiating table once again. The Americans have stated that they will not demand any further freeze from Israel if the latter renews the freeze one last time. However, the US seems to be repeating the same mistakes that create false expectations for the negotiating parties. The US is putting tremendous pressure on Netanyahu to reverse his 10-month old promise to his constituency not to renew the construction freeze, and this will probably lead to Israeli government approval of the renewal. The US believes that significant progress on the border issues will be made in the three months following the renewed freezing, which will eliminate the need for any further freeze. This is the second time the US is making the same mistake, forcing Netanyahu to agree to a freeze in the hope that the time frame will be sufficient to achieve progress in the discussions. When the Americans coerced the parties into the proximity talks, they thought that they could initiate a four-month discussion that would begin with the borders issue, and reach an agreed border before the construction freeze expires. But that, as we know, did not materialize, and when the first freeze expired, it only led to a demand for a second freeze. It is similarly unrealistic, this time, to expect that the parties will solve core issues such as borders, security, and refugees in a mere three months. Israel has already made it clear that it has no intentions of dedicating the first three months of the renewed construction freeze to discuss borders exclusively: It wishes to discuss all core issues, including security, the issue that Israel perceives to be most important. What may be drawing the parties further apart is the fact that the US continues to insist on the "borders first" formula for the direct negotiations, to avoid the need to renew the construction freeze once again.

The pressure the US is putting on the parties to renew negotiations and the "carrots" it is offering in exchange for their participation will probably draw

the parties back to the table. In view of the material differences in the parties' positions, the big question is whether these benefits and threats will be enough to extract the compromises necessary for an agreement.