

Israel/Palestine talks resume

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In the last week Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak restarted talks with Yassir Arafat, chairman of the Palestinian Authority (PA), as it became clear that his priority—an agreement with Syria—would take longer than expected. The two leaders met in Ramallah, on the West Bank, and later in Sharm el Sheik, under the chairmanship of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, to prepare for a new round of talks in Washington on March 18 on the “permanent status” agreement.

The Palestinians and Israelis have been negotiating in fits and starts for nearly seven years. The last meeting took place more than a month ago and ended acrimoniously. After the Israel-Syria talks broke down, the Palestinian negotiators suspended the talks, exasperated with Israel's refusal to withdraw from parts of the occupied West Bank, as previously agreed.

The talks follow extensive meetings with US diplomat Dennis Ross and the Egyptian president. “The presence of Mubarak and Ross was not just symbolic,” said Yasser Abed Rabbo, chief negotiator for the Palestinians and information minister of the Palestinian Authority. “It was meant to provide guarantees that the Israelis would be committed to implement the understandings already reached.”

Israel has agreed to complete a second interim withdrawal from 6.1 percent of the West Bank, open a long-overdue second “safe passage” between Gaza and the northern part of the West Bank, and release a number of Palestinian prisoners by Sunday, March 19. These arrangements were due to have been implemented more than a month ago.

Arafat had demanded that the hand-over include land close to the disputed city of Jerusalem, including the small Arab suburb of Abu Dis, which is situated on a hillside overlooking the Old City, rather than desert and thinly populated areas, as Israel had proposed in the previous round of talks. The defence establishment, which drew up an amended map and agreed it with the Palestinian Authority, thought that Anata, a suburb on the northeastern edge of Jerusalem, would be less politically complicated than the transfer of Abu Dis, which Barak refused. Anata was chosen because it is a small village which, unlike Abu Dis, cannot be turned into a seat for the PA government. Nevertheless

Anata lays on the outskirts of Jerusalem, which the Palestinians claim as their capital. It would provide Arafat with some much-needed political cover.

No sooner had an agreement been reached than Israel went back on the proposals and excluded Anata. This is despite the fact that it is outside Jerusalem's municipal boundaries and Palestinians already have civilian control over the crowded village of 8,500 people, as they do over two other Jerusalem-area villages slated for transfer, Beitunya and Ubeidiya. Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said, “We give the building licenses, run the hospitals and all matters relating to civilian life. We even have a police station. Israel only has the overriding security responsibility, meaning they can arrest suspects. There is no way on earth that Israel will retain control of this area in the long run.”

Barak was acting in the face of mounting opposition from the right-wing Likud party and settlers' organisations, which claimed the loss of Anata and other suburbs would violate the notion that Jerusalem must remain entirely within the Zionist state. They mounted a large protest outside the Knesset, Israel's parliament, to coincide with yet another no-confidence motion against Barak's coalition.

Anata and other villages on the boundaries of Jerusalem have become such an explosive topic that Barak has been forced to drop the plan in order to save his fragile coalition. Instead, Israel will hand over land around other towns in the West Bank.

Even this deal was difficult for him to push through the nine-member security cabinet. One member abstained and three voted against the transfer. The political situation within Israel has become so fraught that every move Barak takes has to be squared with the right wing to keep his coalition government from falling apart. A no-confidence vote could bring the government down, but not the prime minister who is directly elected. Barak would then have to try and cobble together another, equally fractious and fragile coalition.

While Barak's decision to backtrack on Anata drew praise from the Likud and the right wing, left-wing parties and One Israel, the majority party within the coalition, were critical.

That Barak has agreed to come to the negotiating table at all is largely the result of the increasingly urgent intervention

of the Clinton administration, anxious to leave office with a Middle East agreement as a trophy. But just as important is the fear that Arafat is in danger of losing his remaining political credibility.

There has been increasing opposition in the West Bank and Gaza to his and the PA's craven subordination to Israel, as well as to their economic and social policies, their widespread corruption and police-state methods. The growing opposition to the PA convinced Barak that some concessions were necessary in order to shore up Arafat's position and prevent the situation from getting out of hand.

Whereas in the 1987-88 *Intifada* the Palestinian youth rose up in revolt against the Israeli occupation, now they are turning against their own leaders. Bir Zeit, where angry students threw stones at French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, when he described Hezbollah guerrillas fighting the Israeli occupation in south Lebanon as "terrorists", has become a focal point of resistance to the PA.

The Palestinian Preventative Security Services used the pretext of Jospin's stoning to arrest more than 100 students, some of whom took no part in the demonstration, and to conduct a general crackdown on student activists and other opponents. Students were beaten up and imprisoned without access to lawyers.

Eyewitnesses reported that at least one person had been subjected to "shabeh"—the tying of a prisoner in a painful or contorted position. Many have been banned from continuing their studies. Students went on hunger strike and mounted demonstrations to secure the release of those being held by the PA. Palestinian universities in Jerusalem and Nablus came out in support. Several detainees spoke to human rights organisations and said that the authorities had tortured them. Although the students were freed Sunday, March 5, strikes and demonstrations have continued.

Palestinian teachers have been on strike since February 6, demanding that the PA implement an agreed pay deal. Now the teachers are planning to form a union. The protest has included full- and half-day strikes every week. In Hebron, students joined striking teachers and attacked the city's education headquarters. In Bethlehem, residents attacked the police and ransacked government buildings.

The Palestinian security forces, intent on maintaining control, have tried to quash any opposition and silence the media. Last month, they and Israel interrogated the editor of the *New Hebron Times* newspaper and shut down the local television station, both of which had criticised Arafat. The police assume that any criticism of Arafat implies membership in Hamas, the Islamic terrorist group which wants to destroy the so-called "peace process." The PA police torture young Palestinians just like the Israelis did before them.

According to Bassam Eid, head of the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring group, 250 political prisoners are being held in Palestinian jails. Two hundred have been held for over a year without trial. Human rights activists say that the PA is collaborating with Israeli, US and European intelligence agencies to stop terrorism at the expense of their democratic rights.

Within Israel itself, the security forces carried out a raid against a Hamas unit earlier this month in the town of Taibeh, north of Tel Aviv. Israeli commandos killed four Palestinian suspects and arrested one before they demolished a house, which they said was being used to manufacture weapons. Israel said that the men had been caught preparing bomb attacks on Israeli targets. It claimed that five booby traps had been found near the bodies of the militants.

Palestinians have become increasingly hostile to Arafat's negotiations with Israel, which have carved up the West Bank into ever smaller pockets of non-contiguous land, separated families and farms, disrupted economic and social life, and driven thousands of people from their homes. They were enraged when the Israeli government, through the military rule of its supposedly civilian administration, continued its ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian population from Hebron, in the southern West Bank. On February 28, the Civil Administration, accompanied by soldiers and Border Police, raided caves in Jinba, between Yatta and the "Green Line" where 17 families lived, and drove them out. None of this could happen without the knowledge, if not direct complicity, of Arafat and the PA.

Arafat hopes that the talks in Washington will produce an agreement on a third and final Israeli withdrawal that will leave the PA in control of some 40 percent of the West Bank. A final agreement is due by September 13. This is supposed to deal with the status of Jerusalem, the right of the Palestinian refugees outside the West Bank and Gaza to return to Israel/Palestine, the final borders of the Palestinian entity and its access to water. Washington has promised an investment programme once an agreement is reached.



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