

Mounting social tensions in Israel and Palestinian Authority loom over Camp David summit

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Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestine Liberation Organisation Chairman Yassir Arafat were persuaded by the US to proceed with the summit now under way at Camp David despite their frequently stated misgivings. President Bill Clinton and his advisers have stressed the urgent need to reach a final accord ending the 52-year Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in the face of mounting social and political tensions in the Palestinian Authority, Israel and throughout the Middle East.

A major factor behind Washington's insistence on a summit, which many commentators consider badly prepared and highly risky, was Israel's early withdrawal two months ago from southern Lebanon, and the character of the pullout—more a ragged retreat than a dignified exit.

Israel's withdrawal was tied to its negotiations with Syria over the future of the Golan Heights, but as the withdrawal date—initially set for early July—approached, Israel's proxy army, the Southern Lebanon Army, began visibly to disintegrate. As a result, the Hezbollah guerrillas were able to occupy the territories bordering Israel as fast as the Israeli troops pulled out. Following Israel's withdrawal, moreover, Syria refused to resume negotiations, and the death of Syrian President Hafez al-Assad on June 10 added a new element of uncertainty to the volatile political situation in the region.

To the consternation of all three parties to the present summit, Israel's hasty retreat from southern Lebanon provoked a certain growth of militancy within the Arab masses and fuelled opposition to the conciliatory stance of the Arab regimes and Arafat toward the Zionist regime. At the beginning of June, Clinton held talks with Barak in Portugal, where he warned that Israel's

rapid withdrawal had raised the stakes in the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. During her own visit to the Middle East in June, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright warned, "If there is not a resolution, there could be a descent into violence."

The political situation within the Palestinian Authority (PA) is precarious. Arafat declared a state of emergency for the duration of the Camp David talks, but demonstrations have taken place on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip demanding that the PLO leader not "sell out" to the Israelis. One of the most incendiary issues is Arafat's reported readiness to abandon the long-standing demand that the millions of Palestinian refugees be allowed to return to a newly established homeland.

Earlier in May over one thousand political prisoners held by Israel went on hunger strike to protest the conditions of their captivity. Solidarity demonstrations led to clashes with Israeli soldiers, who killed six and seriously wounded several hundred demonstrators.

There is mounting discontent because the creation of the PA has benefited only a narrow Palestinian elite, and popular anger is rising over the repressive character of Arafat's regime. The PA authorities have sought to suppress dissent through midnight arrests, military courts, torture and repression, while justifying their failure to deliver economic and political benefits by the temporary nature of the interim arrangements first drawn up in 1993.

The proposals under discussion at Camp David are said to include the evacuation of just 20 percent of the 180,000 Israeli settlers from the occupied territories, with the remainder remaining under Israeli rule;

continued Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem, with a token Palestinian presence on the outskirts of the city; and no right of return for 3.5 million Palestinian refugees.

Barak's position is hardly more secure than Arafat's. His coalition government has relied on the support of parties opposed to any significant concessions to the Palestinians. On the eve of his departure for the US, six cabinet ministers from three of the right-wing and religious parties that made up one third of his government resigned in protest at the proposals, leaked by the Israeli press, that he was reportedly about to table at Camp David.

Yisrael B'Aliyah, which represents immigrants from the former Soviet Union, and the National Religious Party, which represents Zionists who have settled under Israeli army protection in Gaza and the West Bank, are opposed to the land-for-peace formula that lies at the heart of the negotiations. The third coalition partner that resigned, the fundamentalist Shas party, had only recently pulled back from a threat to pull out of the government after Barak conceded to its main demands.

This leaves Barak with the backing of just 42 of the 120 members of the Knesset, Israel's parliament. He was able to survive a vote of no confidence just one hour before his departure for Camp David only with the support of Arab MPs and small secular parties. This means Barak lacks the "Jewish majority" in Parliament that he had originally sought for the talks.

Political dissension within Israel comes at a time of growing economic and social tensions, as unemployment reaches 10 percent and the gap between rich and poor continues to widen. Public sector workers have struck repeatedly over privatisations, spending cuts, layoffs, depressed wages and deteriorating working conditions. Barak is hoping that a US-brokered deal will bring increased trade and financial aid from the US that will shore up his popular support. At the same time he is walking a political tightrope, as he seeks to minimise opposition from the parties of the extreme right.

In a television address to the nation before he left Israel, Barak appealed to Israelis to support him in a referendum that must be held on any final deal. He promised he would sign "only an agreement that will ensure security for the people of Israel and maintain the red lines of the governments of Israel which are known

to all." He referred to Jerusalem as "the eternal capital of Israel". Ariel Sharon, the leader of the main opposition party, Likud, responded by saying, "Go to elections. Don't threaten us and don't enlist others to threaten us with war and with rising violence, in order to force us into concessions."

Besides maintaining a measure of stability in the Middle East, the US is determined to firmly stamp its own imprimatur on political developments. The European powers, most notably France, are seeking to increase their own influence throughout the region and have repeatedly ignored American trading sanctions against Iraq and Iran.

In response to popular pressure, Arafat has pledged to unilaterally declare Palestinian independence by the September 13 deadline for an agreement. Israeli spokesmen have indicated that they would respond to a unilateral declaration of independence by annexing parts of the West Bank. Its security forces have already started preparing for a possible outbreak of Palestinian violence.

When Arafat last declared his intention to proclaim Palestinian statehood, in the absence of a final agreement with Israel, he made a point of adding that he enjoyed solid support at an international level. The source of this support was indicated by Arafat's July 1 meeting in Paris with French President Jacques Chirac, who presently chairs the European Union.

Four days later, after discussions with Clinton, Barak travelled to London to meet with Prime Minister Tony Blair and then on to Paris to meet with Chirac. Barak told reporters it was important for influential leaders like Blair and Chirac to be fully aware of Israel's position.

A further sign of the pressure being exerted by the US to ensure its interests was the announcement by Israel on July 12 that it would cancel a \$250 million sale of Phalcon early warning radar planes to China. The US had strongly objected to the sale, and threatened to withhold a promised aid package to modernise Israel's armed forces.



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