

Mideast tensions mount following breakdown of Camp David talks

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After more than two weeks of intensive discussions at Camp David, Maryland, Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat failed to reach an agreement.

The talks were convened at the insistence of President Bill Clinton on July 11. At first there were indications that agreement had been reached on several issues in dispute. There was basic acceptance that the borders of a future Palestinian state would incorporate the Gaza Strip and about 90 percent of the West Bank. Arafat signalled his consent that Israel would annex the most densely populated Jewish settlements.

Arafat also agreed to a proposal put forward by Barak on the question of the 3.6 million Palestinian refugees living outside of Israel, under which about 100,000 would be allowed to return to the homes they fled in the 1948 and 1967 wars as part of a family reunification programme. The substantial majority would have no right to return and would instead be compensated from an international fund.

There were substantial financial inducements for the Palestinians to accept these conditions and others that would result in a Palestinian state of an extremely truncated character, including limits on its right to organise its own security. The Clinton administration indicated that it would make at least \$15 billion in extra spending available and possibly as much as \$40 billion on signing of an agreement.

Despite Arafat's willingness to make major concessions, he could not accept the proposals on the fate of Jerusalem offered by Israel and backed by the US. The Palestinians are demanding the return of East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state. The eastern part of the city was seized by Israel from Jordan in the 1967 war and includes the walled city, home of the holiest relics of Islam, Judaism and Christianity.

Barak proposed that Israel keep "residual sovereignty"

over all the holy sites in Jerusalem's Old City, while giving the Palestinians "custodial" or shared sovereignty of some religious sites and the more outlying districts of East Jerusalem. Overall sovereignty would remain in Israeli hands. In an apparently unintended insult, Israel promised to build tunnels to enable Arafat to travel to Palestinian areas of East Jerusalem without having to set foot on Israeli territory.

Arafat insisted that Israel relinquish all of East Jerusalem and that the Palestinians retain sovereignty over Islamic holy sites and their neighbourhoods.

There is no precedent for Israel's proposal in international law. On the contrary, United Nations resolutions still in effect deem Israel's seizure of Jerusalem to be illegal.

Talks first broke down last week, after Barak gave orders to the Israeli delegation to prepare to leave and addressed an open letter to Clinton attacking the Palestinians. Clinton announced the talks had collapsed the next day, as he prepared to leave for the G8 economic summit in Okinawa, Japan.

Barak and Arafat agreed to stay and talk in his absence, under the leadership of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, but no further progress was made. Clinton announced July 25 that the talks had foundered over the future of Jerusalem. He implicitly blamed the Palestinians, stating, "The Israelis moved more from the position they had." Not surprisingly, Barak also blamed Arafat for the failure.

Arafat made no comment, and flew directly to Egypt for talks with President Hosni Mubarak, his main backer.

The failure of the Camp David talks creates a dangerous situation for all those who took part in the negotiations. Barak, Arafat and Clinton issued a joint statement pledging, "The two sides commit themselves to continue their efforts to conclude an agreement on all permanent status issues as soon as possible."

Saeb Erekat, the minister of local government for the Palestinian Authority, told a news conference there had been progress on all issues and “the prospects for a settlement are real”. Dennis Ross, the US Middle East envoy, will visit the region to look into the possibility of restarting the talks, but as yet no date has been agreed.

It will not be easy to do so. Barak entered the talks after narrowly surviving a vote of no confidence in the Israeli parliament. He may not survive another challenge by Israeli hard-liners and religious fundamentalists. At the very least, the opposition Likud will intensify its political attacks and demand early elections.

Arafat's leadership position has been weakened by the failure of negotiations to secure Palestinian statehood. Popular demonstrations were held on the West Bank and Gaza Strip during the talks demanding that Arafat make no concessions to Israel. Hundreds marched in Gaza on Tuesday, demanding a resumption of the *intifada* against Israel. The Islamic fundamentalist Hamas leader, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, declared, “The only choice we have is resistance.... Only by force are we able to retain our rights.”

Arafat was given a hero's welcome by cheering crowds in Alexandria, Egypt and in the Palestinian Authority yesterday, but only because of his refusal to cede to Israeli demands on Jerusalem. The Israeli and Palestinian security forces have both prepared for possible violence in the aftermath of the latest failure. Barak warned that the region was entering a “period of considerable uncertainty”. Israel's Deputy Defence Minister Ephraim Sneh said Israeli security forces were in contact with their Palestinian counterparts, who were also placed on a state of alert.

Arafat has pledged to unilaterally declare an independent Palestinian state by September 13 and now finds it difficult to retreat from such a course. Should he go ahead, Israel has made clear their intention to unilaterally annex areas of the West Bank. Such a scenario could easily escalate into a full-scale resumption of war between Israel and the Palestinians and destabilise the entire Middle East.

To add to the political difficulties confronting the Clinton administration, the US also faces a challenge to its political authority in the Middle East from the European powers. Arafat was encouraged to threaten a declaration of independence after he received backing from France and other European governments.

On June 20, Palestinian cabinet minister Nabil Shaath said he expected France to lead the European Union (EU)

in recognising a Palestinian state, even if it is formed by unilateral declaration. Last year the EU issued a declaration saying the Palestinians had an “unqualified right” to independence within a year, not necessarily through negotiations with Israel. After meetings with European officials, Shaath told a press conference, “The Europeans are ready to accept the [Palestinian] state without connecting it to the peace solution.”

Even should the US, Arafat and Barak succeed in overcoming these obstacles and arrive at some form of settlement before September 13, it will do nothing to meet the democratic and social aspirations of the Palestinian masses.

The breakdown at Camp David comes almost seven years after Arafat and the PLO signed, together with Israel, the Declaration of Principles on Palestinian “self-rule” that set up the Palestinian Authority on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The establishment of the Palestinian Authority has benefited only Arafat and a small ruling clique around him. The more than one million Palestinians who eke out a living in the 28-mile-long and six-mile-wide Gaza Strip are mostly confined to squalid refugee camps. They face appalling poverty, unemployment levels of 60 percent, contaminated water supplies and constant repression by Arafat's police, the Israeli army or both.

Amidst this suffering, they must stand by as some 18 Israeli settlements with 6,000 residents control the best farmland and are supplied with fresh water from private reservoirs. Those seeking work in Israel must run a daily gauntlet of Israeli security forces on the heavily fortified border. Similarly, Palestinians residing in East Jerusalem live in squalor and neglect, prohibited by Israeli law from building on 86 percent of the available land.



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