

Middle East negotiations in Washington amidst continuing violence

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Expectations are high that some form of agreement will emerge from four days of talks between Israel and Palestine in Washington.

Palestinian negotiator Yasser Abed Rabbo told the media that, "We are close to achieving recognition of Palestinian sovereignty over Arab East Jerusalem, including the Holy Sites". The Camp David summit collapsed in July over opposing claims to the Temple Mount/al-Aksa mosque. A more extensive withdrawal of Israeli troops from the West Bank is also said to have been offered.

All parties involved in the latest round of negotiations have a major incentive to secure an agreement ending months of violence that has claimed over 340 lives.

US President Clinton's term of office finishes on January 20 and he has staked a great deal on securing an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. This is his last chance to do so.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak has staked his own future and that of his One Nation coalition government on securing an agreement with the Palestinian Authority, if he is to have any chance of staving off the political challenge of Likud leader Ariel Sharon and being re-elected on February 6.

For his part, Yasser Arafat could lose his leadership to more hardline elements if seven years of peace negotiations fail once again to secure permanent status for the Palestinian Authority.

The very factors that make the three parties anxious to succeed, however, also militate against lasting success for whatever emerges from the talks at Bolling Air Force Base.

With less than a month left in office, an agreement endorsed by Clinton does not carry the weight it once did. Senior Bush supporters have made clear that they will not place the same emphasis on securing a deal

with Arafat and the Palestinians.

Bush will seek to avoid any personal role in the Middle East, while the emphasis on peace negotiations will shift towards securing an agreement between Israel and Syria in line with a strategy focusing on repairing ties with America's Arab allies, informed sources predict.

One pro-Israeli lobbyist commented that, "In the Middle East their focus is going to be on the Arabian Peninsula. They are going to be very concerned about the erosion of America's position in countries like Saudi Arabia."

Edward Djerejian, a former US ambassador to Syria, Lebanon and Israel, and director of the James Baker Institute for Public Policy at Rice University in Houston, is a possible undersecretary of state. He believes that peace between Israel and Syria could help repair relations with key Arab regimes and clear the way for some form of renewed offensive against Saddam Hussein—as has been implicitly threatened by Bush's Secretary of State-elect Colin Powell.

Djerejian added that in the short term, the chances for an Israeli-Syrian agreement are better than those for an Israeli-Palestinian settlement and would reduce the chances of a regional war.

Barak enters into negotiations no less of a lame duck than Clinton. He knows that he has little or no hope of securing re-election without a peace accord under his belt. But however popular this may prove to be with the Israeli electorate, any agreement reached faces attack and sabotage by Israel's right wing.

Barak resigned in order to provoke a Prime Ministerial election and so avoid or at least postpone a general election for the Knesset/parliament that he could no longer control. He has described the prime

ministerial contest as a referendum on peace, portraying himself as the embodiment of the Israeli people's desire for an end to conflict and Likud leader Ariel Sharon (legitimately) as a warmonger.

For the contest to shape up in this way, two things were necessary. Firstly, to ensure that former Likud Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu—who opinion polls gave a substantial lead over Barak—would not stand. And secondly, that there would be no alternative candidate for Israel's left. Netanyahu was able to stand because the Knesset agreed to allow a non-sitting MK to run, but he also demanded that the various parties dissolve the Knesset in order to force a general election. When his ostensible supporters in the religious party Shas refused to support this demand, Netanyahu withdrew from the prime ministerial race.

Former Labour Party Prime Minister Shimon Peres, who won the 1994 Nobel Peace Prize along with then-Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Arafat, tried to mount a leadership challenge against Barak, who he has condemned for his handling of the negotiations with the Palestinians. But his candidacy depended on winning the backing of Barak's main coalition partner, the Meretz party, as he needs the support of 10MKs. Meretz rejected support for Perez' candidacy by 25 to 17 votes.

Barak's victory is nevertheless precarious and does not provide him a strong position from which to sign an agreement with Arafat. His only remaining challenger, Sharon, insists that Barak has "no mandate" to enter negotiations at all. For his part, Netanyahu predicts that Barak has only won a temporary stay of execution. He told a news conference that it was only a matter of time before a paralysed and fragmented parliament would have to dissolve itself. "When it happens, I will be there... running again for the leadership of the country," he said.

Arafat's position is, if anything, more unstable than Barak's. Opposition to any settlement with Israel is widespread amongst the Palestinian masses. Workers throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip went on strike on Tuesday, in support of demands by political groups opposed to the renewal of US-sponsored talks. These included not just the Islamic fundamentalist Hamas, but Arafat's own organisation, Fatah.

Fatah was one of the signatories to a leaflet calling the talks "a theatre" and pledging to continue the

intifada. The strike and further demonstrations were called despite Arafat's meeting last weekend with the heads of all the PA factions to explain the importance of resuming peace talks. Two of Arafat's key aides, Planning Minister Nabil Sha'ath, and Legislative Council Speaker Ahmed Qurei boycotted preparatory meetings leading up the Washington talks.

Arafat may be prepared to make concessions on issues such as the right of return for four million Palestinian refugees, but others are not. Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti stated that his party was opposed to any deal that does not include the right of return for all refugees to Israel, and said that all settlements must be dismantled. He predicted a serious escalation of the intifada in the next two weeks leading up to the anniversary of Fatah's establishment on January 1, 1965, in Egypt. Yesterday was designated a "day of rage" by the intifada leadership, during which two Palestinians and an Israeli were killed by a suicide bomb. Fighting and protests took place throughout the West Bank.



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