

Israeli-Palestinian negotiations stalled

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On Wednesday December 27, the planned summit between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to discuss US proposals to resolve the Israeli Palestinian conflict was called off.

On Thursday, two Israelis were killed and at least 16 injured in explosions attributed to Palestinian groups opposed to the US proposals. Israel sealed off the West Bank and Gaza Strip in response.

The Israeli government had initially accepted US proposals as the basis for negotiations, but only if they went unchallenged by the Palestinians. A statement issued by the One Nation coalition government read more like an ultimatum: "Israel sees these ideas as a basis for discussion provided that they remain unchanged as a basis for discussion also by the Palestinian side."

Once the Palestinian negotiators sent a letter to Clinton raising a number of questions and disagreements, Barak said he would not attend the planned summit at Sharm el-Sheik in Egypt. He also announced that he would not sign an accord transferring sovereignty of the Al-Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem to the Palestinians.

Made after five days of negotiations, US President Clinton's proposals are reported to include:

- * Israel to concede sovereignty over much of East Jerusalem and the Al-Aqsa mosque, known to Jews as Temple Mount.

- * Palestinians to give up the right of return for nearly four million refugees.

- * A Palestinian state constructed on 95 percent of the West Bank and 10 percent of Gaza Strip.

Clinton's proposals would mean Israel giving up some territorial gains made during the Six Day War in 1967, but are still highly detrimental to the Palestinians. The liberal Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* argued that, "the proposed compromise in Jerusalem and the Temple

Mount will yield benefits 10 times greater in terms of security for the state, in gaining recognition for the border alteration (among them Jerusalem)..."

However, Arafat could not sign up to the US terms, despite his desire for some form of agreement before Clinton leaves office on January 12 and the February 6 prime ministerial election in Israel, which could see Barak defeated by right wing Likud party chairman Ariel Sharon.

The proposal that meets most popular opposition amongst Palestinians is the refusal to allow refugees to return, but other major disagreements also exist.

On Jerusalem, the Palestinians would gain sovereignty over the Al Aqsa mosque compound, the third-holiest shrine in Islam, but Israel would have control of archaeological sites beneath the surface. The Palestinians say their sovereignty should also extend below the ground.

Israel will effectively keep nine percent of the territories it occupied on the West Bank and Gaza Strip after the Six Day War. An Israeli-controlled corridor would bisect the West Bank 6-10 miles wide, stretching from Jerusalem in the West to the Dead Sea in the East.

Israeli forces would also remain in the Jordan Valley for three to six years, controlling the borders, and after that an international force would patrol the area.

A Palestinian state formed on such a tenuous basis would be an unviable entity, subordinate economically and militarily to its more powerful neighbour.

Israel has already announced it is stepping up plans to build a fortified electric fence along the June 1967 ceasefire line between Israel and the West Bank. Costing \$25m and 70km (45 miles) long, it will permanently seal off Palestinian areas and cripple the Palestinian economy. It will be accompanied by a \$1bn network of roads, bridges and tunnels—including a \$250m elevated highway with no exits linking Gaza and the West Bank—connecting the Jewish settlements

to Israel, maintaining an Apartheid-style separation of the two peoples.

Consequently, one senior Palestinian negotiator, Yasser Abed Rabbo, denounced the US proposals as “not an opportunity but a trap”. *Al-Baath*, the newspaper of Syria's ruling party, commented that “The United States is, unfortunately, still far away from understanding the realities of the Middle East conflict.”

Arafat's stance is determined largely by the precariousness of his own position. He faces opposition to an agreement with Israel not only from the Islamic fundamentalist groups such as Hamas, but also within his own Fateh organisation. On Tuesday December 27, in an attempt to placate this opposition, the Palestinian Authority released top Hamas leader Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi, who had been imprisoned for sedition after criticising Arafat's signing of the Camp David Agreement last year.

Barak faces equally fierce domestic opposition from his right wing opponents. Sharon has stated flatly that he would not honour any agreement reached between Israel and Palestine before the February 6 election. “Prime Minister Barak has no moral or practical right to conclude fateful diplomatic policies,” said Sharon, “now that he has resigned as prime minister and has no Knesset [parliamentary] majority.”

This stance was agreed in consultation with other opposition parties.

On Tuesday an extra-parliamentary meeting of right wing parties and groups promised a wave of protests against any agreement reached with the Palestinians, proclaiming that Barak's government had no legitimacy because of his refusal to hold a general election.

The Zu Artzeinu movement led by Moshe Feiglin said it would resume civil disobedience measures, such as blocking road intersections, that it had practiced on the eve of the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzakh Rabin—one of the architects of the 1993 Oslo Accord between Israel and the Palestinians—by a religious fanatic in 1995.

Uri Ariel of the Yesha Council of settlements said that “Barak has lost his soul” and “Unusual protests are needed now”. Nedie Matar of Women in Green called Barak's actions “treason” and right wing activist Elyakim Ha'etzni said, “Barak is conducting a putsch”. Noam Arnon of the Jewish community in Hebron called for armed resistance to any attempt to relocate

Jewish settlers and for people to “get ready for a siege”. Earlier that day, Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert accused Barak of “working to dismantle the state of Israel.”

About 200 rightwing Jewish demonstrators opposed to Israel ceding sovereignty over the Temple Mount fought with Israeli riot police outside the complex on Thursday.

Giving some indication of the insurrectionary mood amongst Israeli rightists is the announced resignation of Brigadier-General Efi Eitam. He had been criticised by Israeli Chief-of-Staff Shaul Mofaz for making several public statements condemning the Barak government for negotiating with the Palestinians. During the first Palestinian *Intifada*, he was in charge of troops that carried out severe beatings, including breaking the limbs of Palestinians, for which he was never prosecuted. It is widely predicted that Eitam will now enter politics at the head of some right wing party.



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