

What happens when the talks fail?

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By Oded Eran

Before direct negotiations between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas get underway, the key players need to be asked a few questions.

Netanyahu should be asked how it came to pass that a careful, conservative leader such as himself pushed for direct negotiations in which he will be forced to outline clear positions on topics like Jerusalem and borders. Even if he has come to terms with the two-state solution, it is doubtful he will offer what his predecessor, Ehud Olmert, proposed to the same Palestinian negotiator. Does Netanyahu believe he can meet U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's expectations that the two sides can work out an agreement within a year?

The gap between the positions held by most coalition members, including Netanyahu's inner cabinet of seven, and those held by the Palestinians is evident - and nothing has happened to indicate it has narrowed. So why did the prime minister push for direct negotiations? Why did he compel leaders like U.S. President Barack Obama and French President Nicolas Sarkozy to use considerable political capital to convince Abbas to resume negotiations? What will happen if these two presidents pressure Netanyahu to return the favor by making concessions to the Palestinians?

Abbas must be asked if he would find himself in an awkward position if Israel were to announce a complete freeze on construction in the territories and East Jerusalem, along with the removal of illegal outposts. His weakness is evident in his total lack of influence in the Gaza Strip, accompanied by Hamas' heedless defiance. What sort of guarantees has he been given, whereby he can present himself as a warrior for the obtainment of the national goals cherished by all segments of the Palestinian people? If, for example, he is offered less than what Olmert proposed, has Abbas been told he will receive international backing for a rejection of the Israeli proposal?

King Abdullah of Jordan and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak have already attended a few celebratory openings of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. They've listened to Israeli prime ministers, and to leading figures from both sides of the dispute. It would be interesting to know what persuaded them to take the long journey to Washington once again. Who or what convinced them the talks will end differently this time? Is it possible Netanyahu whispered something in their ears that convinced them of his seriousness this time around?

Obama, it can be assumed, is troubled by the polls indicating decreased public support for him in America. He is also likely worried about the Congressional elections in November, and is perhaps concerned that the withdrawal from Iraq, and the expected withdrawal from Afghanistan, will yield negative results as well. Does Obama believe a festive ceremony in September will counterbalance all of that in the eyes of the American voter? Or did he "recruit" Abbas and Netanyahu to improve his image in the eyes of the Jewish voter?

Has Defense Minister Ehud Barak, who went through the same thing in September 1999 at Sharm el-Sheikh, warned Netanyahu and the others that a celebratory launch to the talks, and setting a target date of one year, are not enough? Has he recommended, based on his own experience, that an alternative be prepared in the event that the gaps between the sides preclude a full agreement on the key issues?

All the involved parties would be wise if, alongside their preparations for an agreement-signing ceremony on the White House lawn in September 2011, they formulate an alternative outline. Such a framework would prevent a free-fall toward a third intifada and would facilitate progress, even if a comprehensive agreement on all the salient issues is not reached.

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