

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Published on *The National Interest* (<http://nationalinterest.org>)

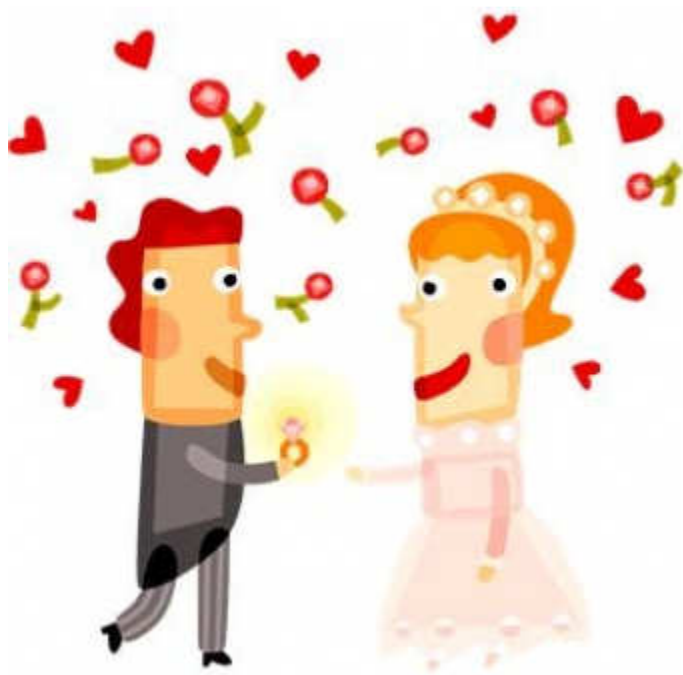
Source URL (retrieved on Sep 2, 2010): <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/triumph-hope-over-experience-4006>

Like Second Marriages

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August 31, 2010

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Like second marriages, the renewal of direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations represents the triumph of hope over experience. In fact, it might even be described as the audacity of hope, because the event being held at the White House on September 2 is clearly a Barack Obama production.

The Obama administration has tried hard to distinguish itself from its predecessors and demonstrate from the very outset its commitment to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Nevertheless, it has had less to show for its efforts in its first 18 months in office than did the ostensibly “do-nothing” administration of George W. Bush in its last 18 months, and the President has publicly conceded that he may not have properly appreciated the complexity of the problem. But rather than walk away, the administration has redoubled its investment and now must manage a process for which the protagonists themselves have far less enthusiasm.

True, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has consistently demanded the resumption of direct negotiations. That served his purposes as long the Palestinian refusal to come to the table allowed him to adopt the posture of peace advocate at

virtually no cost. But now that negotiations are actually set to begin, he will face the dilemma of either showing flexibility, thereby alienating his governing coalition and many in his own party, or else sticking fast to his declared principles, thereby alienating domestic critics and precisely those international actors, especially the United States, that have helped satisfy his demand.

As for Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, he is practically being dragged kicking and screaming to Washington in much the same way that Yasir Arafat was brought to Camp David ten years ago. As long as Abbas stayed away from the table, he could deflect the wrath of both the Palestinian rejectionists whose principled opposition to direct negotiations reflects their rejection even of oblique legitimization of Israel, and the instrumentalists who accept the idea of negotiations but only if certain preconditions are met in order to rectify what they see as an imbalance of power favoring Israel. Indeed, one of the American inducements apparently given to persuade Abbas to abandon his lofty perch was an assurance that the negotiations will not drag on indefinitely, that is, a timetable or "term of reference" of one year in which to conclude the talks.

There is no other persuasive explanation for such a commitment, because it is logically impossible to stipulate in advance how long it will take adversaries to agree on anything. Moreover, the Oslo Accords of 1993, the so-called Road Map of 2002, and the Annapolis process begun in 2008 all demonstrate that predefined timetables are practically meaningless. Nevertheless, the administration has committed itself to success within a year and even predicted that it will succeed, and it now politically saddled with this burden.

Of course, it is not inconceivable that the gamble will pay off. The United States will closely chaperone the process and there is at least a theoretical possibility that within one year, Israelis and Palestinians will overcome their ingrained suspicions, work out practical solutions to the immensely complicated issues on the agenda, and agree on a formula to resolve the century-old conflict. Still, that doesn't appear to be the most likely outcome, and even if the negotiations don't explode in mutual acrimony, the administration ought to be preparing for the possibility that they will be deadlocked when the allotted year has expired.

Moreover, a year from now, Iran is likely to be at, or even past, the threshold of nuclear military capability. And a year from now, the United States is scheduled to begin the withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan, which means that unless a stable peace in that country will have meanwhile been achieved, Obama will either have to withdraw in defeat or else postpone the withdrawal and explain to an increasingly war-weary public why he couldn't meet his stated objective.

To ensure that a failed Israeli-Palestinian peace process (with potentially incendiary results) is not added to this list of travails, the administration should already be thinking now about contingency plans in case comprehensive agreement remains out of reach. Such plans might include some interim arrangement (renamed something else to accommodate Palestinian sensitivities), perhaps based on the still-unimplemented second stage of the Road Map, which calls for a Palestinian state with provisional borders, in order to preserve the possibility of future momentum. Otherwise, the only alternative to total success will be total failure. And combined with the other circumstances likely to prevail in mid-2011, total failure could jeopardize not only the viability of Obama's presidency but also America's standing as a serious superpower on the world stage.

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