

INSS Insight No. 1013, January 16, 2018

**Getting to the Table: Key Elements of the US Approach
to Restart the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Negotiations**

Shimon Arad

The details of the long-awaited US Mideast peace plan are deliberately scant. The plan is being formulated by a disciplined team led by senior advisor Jared Kushner, and no information pertaining to the proposal has been released or leaked. Nonetheless, an analysis of Kushner's comments at the Saban Forum 2017, President Trump's decision on Jerusalem, and the chapter on the Middle East in the recently released National Security Strategy (NSS) provides key insights into the administration's thinking about the negotiations. A close reading of these developments reveals that a new negotiations paradigm is being formulated that departs from a number of traditional policies pursued by previous administrations.

Aiming for the "Ultimate Deal"

The Trump administration appears to reject a phased approach to final status negotiations based on interim solutions or confidence-building arrangements. Rather, it is focused on initiating comprehensive final status negotiations.

According to the administration's logic, an incremental approach would have substantial drawbacks. Given the lack of faith between the sides, it would not garner the necessary trust needed to overcome the inherent difficulties that will inevitably arise from the process itself or from negative regional influences. This crisis-ridden process would not only endanger the peace process but would defer the strengthening of Israel-Gulf relations, undermining part of the US strategy to counter Iran. The administration believes that the Arab world would not normalize relations with Israel without a comprehensive final agreement with the Palestinians. In this context, the administration is cognizant of the Palestinian and Arab skepticism of an incremental approach, which contends that Israel will come into such a process with the objective of protracting negotiations while advancing "facts on the ground" in the West Bank.

The Regional Context

President Trump's new NSS endorses a long term US regional role in the Middle East designed to promote a favorable balance of power and stability, and further US security and economic interests. The regional disorder is seen to stem from the nexus between Iranian expansion, violent jihadist terror and ideology, weak states, socio-economic

stagnation, and regional rivalries. Within this outlook, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is no longer considered by the US as a major cause of the region's problems. Nonetheless, a peace treaty is deemed to be an important enabler for stronger Israel-Gulf ties, which will serve the focal interest of advancing a favorable regional balance of power and confronting common threats. In this vein, the US approach assigns the pragmatic Arab Sunni states a number of roles, including helping to bring the Palestinians to the table and providing legitimacy for concessions that will perforce need to be made. In addition, the economic and political post-peace dividends that these countries can offer the sides are cast as incentives for negotiations.

A Business-like Approach

The President's team seems to be driven more by interest-based policy considerations than by the value-based precepts that have been championed by much of the international community and previous administrations. Their efforts seem to be anchored in a forward-looking, problem-solving perspective designed to further US regional interests, rather than in a value-driven effort to find idealistic solutions to what are perceived to be past injustices or conflicting historical claims. This outlook opens up the prospects for new approaches to solve old problems, and as seen with relation to Jerusalem, the Trump team has already broken with longstanding policy conventions. Proposals put forward by the sides to the negotiations are more likely to be judged by the Americans based on their practical utility, rather than on their historical legitimacy.

Getting the Sides to the Table

Palestinian intransigence is likely seen by the US negotiation team as the major stumbling block to the renewal of talks. During the previous round of mediation in 2014, talks between the US and Israel were progressing, while it was the Palestinians who bowed out of the process (as they did in 2008 when presented with a peace proposal by Israeli Prime Minister Olmert). On March 17, 2014, Palestinian President Abu Mazen was presented by President Obama with a set of proposals, some of which had been tilted in the Palestinians direction. Abu Mazen avoided answering and asked for time to consider the proposals. He was given until March 25. To date, he has yet to respond. Instead, the Palestinians embarked on an effort to internationalize the conflict, trying to extract an increasing price for Israel from the stalemate in order to improve their bargaining position.

In contrast, given its dependence on the US and its appreciation of the current administration and its stand on Jerusalem, Israel – even under its present right wing coalition government - would appear to pose an easier challenge toward resumption of negotiations, so long as severe Palestinian preconditions are done away with.

Thus, the administration has embarked on a number of steps designed to underscore to the Palestinian leadership that this is a new ball game in which the Palestinians will forfeit from the continued stalemate, while Israel gains. The recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital illustrates Palestinian loss that can be rectified only through a negotiated agreement with Israel regarding the permanent status of east Jerusalem. President Trump's refusal to fully endorse the two-state solution is another message to the Palestinians. By stating that he will support "a two-state solution, if agreed to by both sides," he implies that the US could possibly support a sovereignty-minus reality if negotiations are not renewed or successful.

For Israel, the US has positive incentives (Jerusalem, regional benefits) to secure a return to the negotiation table. With the Palestinians, the US is trying to emphasize their tangible losses from intransigence and that their best prospects are through negotiations.

Implications

The Trump administration is committed to advance an Israeli-Palestinian peace process designed to achieve the "ultimate deal." The timeframe for this is flexible and has probably been delayed by the Palestinian backlash following the US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. In the meantime, the US continues to redefine the existing negotiation paradigm and draw in regional stakeholders. This presents Israel with opportunities, even in the absence of negotiations, to improve its regional standing.

Israel will find it hard to reject an American initiative to renew peace negotiations when presented. In order to gain US support for its bargaining positions, it is advised to define them in practical strategic terms, showing how they interface with the advancement of US goals in the region, rather than in historical and ethical perspectives.

*** *Col. (res.) Shimon Arad writes on regional security matters.*