



Interview with Itamar Rabinovich: Walking the Tightrope of Middle East Diplomacy

Michael Mylrea

In an attempt to revive peace talks, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert recently met with Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas at his residence in Jerusalem. Once again, Palestinian and Israeli leaders appear to be at an important crossroads. Is peace on the horizon? Or will violence erupt? Tough questions loom ominously. The complex environment of Middle East diplomacy is like walking a tightrope, where each negotiation rests on a delicate balance between peace and war. As Israel's former Ambassador to the United States and Chief Negotiator to Syria, Itamar Rabinovich has walked this tightrope, negotiating through some of Israel's most challenging times. Former Ambassador Rabinovich sat down with Al Nakhlah to shed light on his diplomatic experience, offering important lessons from the past and his unique perspective on the future challenges and opportunities in the Middle East.

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What does Israel hope to accomplish at the upcoming peace summit? And, how will current events in the region affect its ability to realize these goals?

I think Israeli expectations, in anticipation of the peace summit as it is referred to, are quite

Michael Mylrea is a managing editor of Al Nakhlah the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, and researcher at Harvard Law School's Berkman Center at MIT.

modest.

Given the problems of the Bush administration and the fact that it is an administration that is on its way out and bogged down in Iraq, coupled with the weakness of Abu Mazen and that Hamas is in control of Gaza, and the fact that the Syrians can rock the boat through Lebanon and through their influence on Hamas and Islamic Jihad, the sense is that it is not the right time to go for final status negotiations. Therefore, the Israeli policy would be to try to look for what we sometimes call a declaration of principles, which would not exact that high of a price from the Olmert government, and which would be accompanied by Israeli gestures on the ground such as release of prisoners, removal of roadblocks, and maybe dismantling of illegal settlements. This is the Israeli expectation, but not the Palestinian expectation. So, the Palestinians have higher expectations and the sizable gap between expectations has already led to a postponement in the peace talks. I think the postponement occurred because Secretary Rice and her team realized there would not be enough time for them to narrow the gap sufficiently for

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some kind of success to emerge out of the conference.

The violence that preceded the Oslo peace negotiations and Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip appears to have made the Israeli public pessimistic about the upcoming peace process. Furthermore, recent violence between Hamas and Fatah and continued Israeli settlement expansion in the occupied territories, also paint a pessimistic picture of the latest peace initiative from a Palestinian perspective. This has led a number of scholars to warn that another round of failed peace negotiations could trigger a third intifada. Could you touch on the consequences of raising high expectations for the current peace talks?

When there is failure, there is a sense of despair and exasperation that could lead to another outburst of violence. It could play into the hands of Hamas, who would then say, "we told you, there is no hope on this path and you have to join our path, and the only way is violent resistance." So the answer is yes. And then, of course, there is a domestic price of failure for all parties involved. I think one of the Bush administration's purposes is to try and end eight years in office with something positive in the context of the Middle East against the back drop of Iraq, and a resonant failure is not what they have in mind.

Considering the severity of the consequences of failed negotiations, how do you know when it is the right time to negotiate? What criteria need to be in place in the context of Middle East diplomacy?

In conflict resolution theory, there is an important concept of ripeness. You need to identify when a conflict is ripe or almost ripe for resolution. There is positive and negative ripeness. Positive ripeness is when parties can expect benefits, and negative ripeness is when they are under pressure and feel despair. The prospect of what a negotiation can produce for you has to be more enticing than the status quo

because in order to make a deal you have to pay a price and it is painful. The question is if the alternative is more painful or less painful and if the rewards offered by the alternative are large enough to make up for the pain.

Another important variable is the concept of time. Is time working for me or against me? If it's working for me, let me wait. If time seems to be working against me, let me make a deal now. And of course the decision makers and mediators need to be able to read these trends correctly and make a good judgment call. You know, it's not a mechanical process where you go by the criteria and measure them. It's often a question of instinct that politicians and diplomats need to have.

In your book, "Waging Peace" you mention that "the first step to understanding the complexity of the [Arab-Israeli] dispute is recognition that there is no single Arab-Israeli dispute but a cluster of distinct, interrelated conflicts."¹ Could you give an example of how the interplay of other regional conflicts contributes to the complexity?

Indeed, it is complex. We have had the conflict for more than 60 years now, and the peace process for 34 years now has not been concluded successfully. This bears testimony to the complexity and difficulty of the conflict. For example, consider how the Gulf War weakened the PLO and enabled Baker to invite a Palestinian delegation to Madrid without the PLO. There is always interplay of regional politics. The art of policy making and planning is the ability to read the trends correctly even when total information is not always available.

What should be Israel's role in finding a solution to the Fatah and Hamas split?

Actually, I think it's not the right thing for Israel to try and engineer Palestinian politics. The product of Israeli engineering will always be illegitimate. But Israel can act indirectly. If Israel thinks Fatah as a secular, nationalist, and pragmatic group is the answer to Hamas, it can, without being too transparent, try to help Fatah.

Do you believe Fatah will be able to hold the West Bank? What do Israel's actions (or lack thereof) in this current crisis mean for the future of the Palestinian territories, Israel and the region?ⁱⁱ

I think Fatah can retain its control over the West Bank. Israel can be helpful and is helpful in that regard because Israel's presence in the West Bank is very concrete unlike that in Gaza, which is cut off from Israel. And, therefore, I think that Fatah's ability to retain its control over the West Bank is quite good. Its ability to recapture Gaza is questionable and of course the enduring situation of a divided Palestine is not conducive to peacemaking. I'm afraid there is not much Israel can do about it, except to live with it.

Could you imagine a viable vision of a divided Palestinian State?

It is not going to be very viable. Not a state, but state-led. This means that as long as you have divided authority among the Palestinians, it is going to be very difficult to come to a final status agreement.

When you were a chief Israeli negotiator with Syria during negotiations in 1993, it was really the first time that Syria and Israel came close to a peace agreement. During that time the Syrian position was: "full peace for full withdrawal." The Israeli demands were: quality peace, normalization and water issues. In the background, the Oslo peace accords presented a window for peace between Palestinians and Israelis. Since then a lot has changed. What would a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace agreement mean for the region?

Comprehensive peace would mean a lot because the real problems of the region go well beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The main problems are overpopulation, discrepancy between populations and resources, unequal

distribution of financial resources, and regional demography. Without massive investment in development projects, creating jobs for the unemployed, and raising the standards of living in the Arab world, there will not be political stability in the region. So, comprehensive peace would mean a first step towards investing in and addressing the real underlying problems.

In my experience working on bilateral trade negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis, I've often heard a number of Palestinians say that the only reason Israel even considers peace is to open up the borders to take advantage of business opportunities that would present themselves.ⁱⁱⁱ Do you believe there is any truth to that argument? If not, from where does that argument stem?

No. But this argument is not surprising. In a state of conflict there are always these mutual complaints and paranoia. I've also heard an argument from Palestinians who believe that the Israelis actually want to control them economically, replacing one form of control with another, and Palestinians will end up being providers of cheap labor to a more powerful and sophisticated Israeli economy. So this is not the only argument in town.

What position do you foresee the U.S. playing in creating an environment for a peace agreement between Israeli and Syria, and how would that affect the region?

It's not a peace agreement, but an improvement of relations. Of course, peace between Syria and Washington would include an American decision, as it was in the 1990s, to try and work out a peace deal

between Syria and Israel. And quite a few Israelis would be supportive of that. It wouldn't

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necessarily be something negative that America would need to push down the throat of Israel. The obstacles to American-Syrian understanding are not found in the Golan issue, but more in the fact that Syria is seen as an Iranian client. I think the U.S. will demand Syria distance itself from Iran with as precondition to building a future relationship between Washington and Damascus. But I personally believe that as long as the Bush administration is in place, this peace agreement is not likely to take place. However, if the U.S. were able to pull Syria away from the Iranian orbit, it would be a diplomatic coup. But I don't think it could happen soon.

How could you make it happen?

You open a confidential dialogue. You lay your cards on the table and try to play them well. It's not easy. But this is not easy if the Syrians, as part of this package, want the U.S. to recognize their supremacy in Lebanon. The Bush administration is not going to do that. The next administration maybe yes, maybe no. It's a very difficult situation.

The situation with Libya was also difficult considering Gaddafi's nuclear weapons program and support for terrorist groups. But in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, he has bowed to American pressure and moved towards reform. What lessons in diplomacy can be drawn from this for dealing with rogue regimes?

Libya represents a great American success story. It's limited, but for Gaddafi to dismantle his nuclear program and cease to engage in terrorism, this was a great diplomatic coup for the United States.

Could you see something similar happening from American pressure on Iran?

Not right now. I would have loved to see this, but I don't see that now.

Iran was one of the first nations to recognize Israel, and had a close political alliance with Israel during the era of the Pahlavi dynasty. Though hostility towards Israel accompanied Khomeini's rise to power and the Islamic revolution in Iran, is there anything from the previous narrative that could be built upon in terms of repairing the current relationship between Israel and Iran?

It doesn't translate immediately. But it shows that there is no underlying national conflict between Iran and Israel. It's not going to happen anytime soon, but at some point in the future a close relationship or at least a normal relationship could be restored. But for that there would have to be a change of regime. This is an absolute precondition.

In an article you wrote for the Israeli daily Haaretz, you stated that "time is not a neutral factor, passivity does not lead anywhere, and one who does not take initiative, even on a different front, will find himself ultimately reacting to the initiatives of others."iv Could you touch on this in the context of initiatives taken by other regional powers?

I wrote that paragraph against the opinion of some Israelis who think that all we have to do is play for time, just sit on our assets and try to protect them. Norman Podhoretz, the editor of *Commentary*, has said that the Cold War ended because the U.S. had the nerve and ability to stay the course until the Soviet Union collapsed. He believes that Israel should do the same and something similar will happen. I don't think so; I think we should react.

React--like the recent Israeli attack in Syria?

I can touch on that, but the truth is I don't know. I can only speculate. I assume that the Israeli raid had to do with a joint Syrian-North Korean venture that had a nuclear dimension to it.

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I think that is an issue of huge proportions. But, in a very peculiar way, there is a conspiracy of silence: Syria cannot admit that it was caught red handed with the North Koreans, the Bush

administration doesn't want to destroy its deal with North Korea, and Israel is not interested in pushing Syria into a defensive corner. And, therefore, this great story remains under the radar.

The situation is reminiscent of the Egyptian-Israeli situation between 1971 and 1973, when Sadat spoke of both making peace and going to war, and ended up going to war and making peace later. I hope we don't have to go through the same sequence again.

High oil prices and the overthrow of President Saddam Hussein's regime have emboldened Iran's position of power in the region. Meanwhile, Iran continues to build nuclear facilities, sponsor terrorist groups, and threaten to destroy Israel. But attempts to isolate and stop Iran from pursuing this course have failed. What role should Israel play in Iran's moves towards regional hegemony and nuclear weapons?

I very much hope that Israel can restrain itself and not jump to the head of the line. There is no real national conflict between Iran and Israel. And we should not contribute to a perception that we are national enemies. And it should not also be portrayed as an Israeli problem. It's a global problem, even if the rest of the world refuses to recognize that it is so. And, therefore, we are to be discreet, cooperate behind the scenes, and try to encourage the right action, but not, as I said, jump to the head of the line.

A number of American presidential candidates have argued the need to open up a dialogue with enemy countries like Iran and Syria. The Bush administration has for the most part stuck to its "Axis of Evil" line, which avoids fostering

dialogue. What are your thoughts on negotiating with enemy countries?

You can have secret negotiations and secret diplomacy, similar to what the U.S. had in the days of Kissinger between China and the Vietcong as a prelude to a major breakthrough. It has to be secret; not in the public limelight. And hopefully you could identify common ground and find a diplomatic solution to the problem. If you find a solution, wonderful. If you don't, then you know that you have exhausted diplomatic means before military action needs to be taken. So, I'm actually all for it, if it's done the right way.

What is the advantage of a secret conversation versus open dialogue?

Open dialogue is monitored. It is very difficult to negotiate when you have to give a daily report to journalists about what was accomplished that day. It is very difficult to move. There is a time for public diplomacy, at a certain place and point. But it must be preceded by a secret negotiation that is not monitored by media and publics, where you can make substantial progress and begin to build support for whatever agreement is taking shape before you come out to the public arena.

How would you describe the general sentiment of negotiations in the Middle East? How do your personal relationships and feelings evolve when negotiating on such a high level? Where do you start?

You have to build these relationships. It's a business-like enterprise. But at the same time you need to build a human relationship (not that anyone is going to make a concession to you because you smile in a certain way). The human chemistry is a very important component in any negotiation.

What about when negotiations fail? What are some of red lines that would make a military response imperative?

Well, let's take the raid in Syria. Let's say the prospect of Syria acquiring nuclear capability is a red line. Syria sending large army into Jordan is a

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red line. An attack from across the border—shelling—is a red line. There are many red lines.

What about red lines with the Gaza Strip?

Gaza is a good example. Israel can, not that it should, come to live with Qassam rockets landing in Sderot, but a larger rocket landing on some strategic asset that we have near or in Ashkelon, which is a major city, is a quantum, qualitative change. And I think that if Palestinians hit Ashkelon or a strategic facility near Ashkelon there will be massive Israeli action in the Gaza Strip.

Until now, Qassam rocket attacks have originated from the Gaza Strip. What if that problem evolved to the West Bank, where a Qassam rocket could hit the heart of Israel, shut down air traffic, and severely damage the economy? How will that affect future plans for Israeli withdrawal?

Israel wants a defensive perimeter around the airport so that it's safe from missiles.

What lessons can the U.S. apply to Iraq from Israel's evacuations from the Gaza Strip or Lebanon?

What comes immediately to mind in Iraq is if you withdraw unilaterally you have to expect civil war and enemies taking over. You lose control. You cut your losses, but you lose control.

After the Second Lebanon war, voices from the American defense establishment began to question if Israel was a strategic asset or a liability for the U.S.? What steps could be taken to strengthen the strategic nature of this relationship?

Whatever raid took place in Syria on September 6 took care of that question. I think that much of the damage done to Israel's credibility as a military ally was rectified with the raid in Syria.

What lessons can you impart to future Middle East diplomats and negotiators?

The first is patience. Negotiations in the Middle East need to be conducted with a lot of patience. Americans, and oftentimes Israelis, are always in a hurry. Secondly, both Americans and Israelis look with contempt upon haggling and bargaining: you pay a price for that in the Middle East because bargaining is part of the game. If you don't bargain and let up your position, you lose.

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