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Proximity Talks: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

By [David Makovsky](#)

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U.S. special envoy for Middle East peace George Mitchell is currently in Jerusalem amid wide expectation that on Saturday the Palestinians will approve proximity talks with Israel. For its part, Israel has already agreed to the talks.

Following a phone conversation this past Monday between President Obama and Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu, the White House said it had urged proximity talks with the Palestinians as a means of transitioning to direct talks as quickly as possible. Indirect talks are a departure from the more direct format that has defined Israeli-Palestinian negotiations since the landmark Madrid peace conference in 1991. As late as 2009, during the final months of the Olmert government, Israeli and Palestinian leaders were meeting directly almost every week. But in 2010, it appears that George Mitchell will be shuttling between Netanyahu's office in Jerusalem and President Mahmoud Abbas's office in Ramallah.

Although Israel has been willing to hold direct talks for months, Abbas has convinced himself and others that face-to-face meetings would leave him politically exposed if they do not prove to be serious. But while expectations on all sides are modest, the proximity approach has emerged because alternative proposals -- such as a statement of U.S. principles -- seem even more problematic and fraught with risk.

Talks Held Hostage by Arab League?

Just as proximity talks seem like a step backward, the idea of seeking Arab consent for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations is antithetical to the legacy of modern Palestinian nationalism. Although Yasser Arafat remains a deeply controversial historical figure, he was able to extricate Palestinian politics from the vicissitudes of inter-Arab dynamics after 1974, when the Arab League transferred the Palestinian issue to the Palestine Liberation Organization. Today, however, Arab states are once again being asked to approve Israeli-Palestinian talks.

This situation stems from an incident in fall 2009, when Arab leaders privately told Abbas that they would shelve a UN report on the Gaza war. They reneged on their commitment, however, citing concerns about negative publicity in the Arab media. Abbas was deeply offended and is now insisting the Arab states sign on to proximity talks so that he does not feel politically exposed again.

Although there are advantages to providing Arab cover for Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, formalizing the move is bound to create negative precedents. For example, if such negotiations require an Arab-approved extension in the future, countries such as Libya or Syria could decide to oppose it for extraneous reasons. In other words, peace talks could be held hostage by the lowest common denominator.

Time Factors

Currently, both the Israelis and the Palestinians have decided to limit their participation in the proximity talks to four months. To be sure, the Palestinians favor proximity talks because the format maximizes the U.S. role,

which they believe will benefit their interests. But they also seem eager to avoid indefinite talks. Meanwhile, the Israelis prefer a time limit because they do not want to supplant direct negotiations down the road, fearing that vibrant proximity talks will make face-to-face talks superfluous. Although Israel has accepted the proximity format, Deputy Prime Minister Dan Meridor has said that progress is more likely when the two sides sit together.

For the United States, proximity talks provide flexibility and avoid the diplomatic deadlock that can quickly emerge from direct talks. Each side can prioritize its issues and sidestep the burden of agreeing on a mutual agenda. The Palestinians can begin with land, and Israel can begin with security. Yet, despite the pressing timeline, Washington has yet to work out many of the details surrounding the conduct of the proximity meetings, such as their format and frequency.

The Obama administration likely views proximity talks as a means of probing the parties and identifying possible convergences. In that regard it is interesting to speculate whether Mitchell's effort sets in motion a back channel for direct Israeli-Palestinian talks. For Mitchell, who assumed his post on the administration's second day in office, the proximity discussions will be his first opportunity to formally engage the parties on the core issues of borders, security, Jerusalem, and refugees. Until now, his focus has been on settlements and other confidence-building issues, in addition to getting proximity talks started.

Some have speculated that the Palestinians may lack incentive for progress during proximity talks because they believe the United States will proffer a full peace plan or statement of principles if the talks fail. Therefore, in addition to the four-month limit, Washington should remind Abbas that another deadline is looming in September: Israel's settlement moratorium. Given that the Palestinians have made this such an important issue, Mitchell could use it as an incentive, prodding them to move forward before the moratorium expires.

Proximity Talks and the Obama Administration Policy Debate

The focus on proximity talks constitutes a short-term victory for those in the Obama administration who favor negotiations over those who believe the president should put forward his own views on the core issues. The latter school believes that any set of "Obama Principles" would not be sharply different from the "Clinton Parameters" of December 2000. In their view, the proposed negotiations will achieve little, and a new-but-familiar set of formal U.S. principles would constitute a default policy option during the subsequent vacuum.

But Israel believes that any statement of U.S. principles would make negotiations more unlikely, given that Palestinians prefer U.S. proposals to those offered by the Netanyahu government. Mitchell reportedly opposes a statement of principles for similar reasons, fearing that it would bring his peace talks to a halt. According to this view, presenting American ideas can be a useful diplomatic tool, but only at the proper time and under the appropriate circumstances. The mere articulation of U.S. policy does not advance U.S. interests, especially if that policy is not implemented. Such an approach risks demonstrating U.S. weakness rather than U.S. strength, with regional ramifications for America and its allies.

Offering a set of "Obama Principles" could be useful only if there is broad buy-in from the Israelis, Palestinians, and key Arab states, and only if serious negotiations have gone as far as they can. In that case, U.S. principles could help bring the negotiations to a successful conclusion by acting as a bridging proposal. But such an exercise makes sense only after Washington has gained as precise a read as possible regarding what might work and what is required to fill the gaps. In contrast, drafting principles now would not reflect the state of negotiations and could alienate parties the United States hopes to recruit.

More specifically, advocating this idea before it is fully examined may narrow U.S. options rather than broaden them. Introducing "Obama Principles" would be akin to using our last bullet -- after the president has stated his case, there is nowhere else to go. As for regional repercussions, presenting U.S. principles in the

current environment -- without creating the conditions in which they would be welcomed, and without a diplomatic strategy for dealing with the potential consequences of such a move -- risks doing more harm than good.

Of course, it is clear that if the parties and Arab states would actually sign off on explicit compromises before such principles are announced, this would stir more of a debate than anything Washington could do. Such compromises would require more effort than the current Arab Peace Initiative, and therefore one has to be skeptical that they will occur at this time.

That is, in the absence of preparation and coordination, Israeli, Palestinian, and Arab leaders would no doubt focus on the concessions involved in endorsing U.S. principles rather than the potential gains, with each comparing the principles to positions they have already publicly advocated or accepted. In other words, rather than accept principles that require them to step away from their own declared positions without a clear dividend in return, they would likely accede to political considerations and stand up to Washington in the name of their national interests.

The yardstick by which to measure any statement of U.S. principles is whether they can succeed, and as a bridging proposal when the parties are moving close to each other, success is possible. But in any other context they are more likely to fail. It is this recognition that is driving Washington's belief that for all its imperfections, the proximity approach is now preferable to riskier options.

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