

PolicyWatch #1694

## Peace within a Year? Israeli-Palestinian Direct Talks Resume

By [David Makovsky](#)

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On Friday, August 20, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced the resumption of direct peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians, to be launched in Washington next week. On September 1, President Obama will welcome Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority (PA) president Mahmoud Abbas, as well as Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and Jordan's King Abdullah. Direct talks between Netanyahu and Abbas are scheduled to begin the next day, with the objective of reaching agreement on the permanent-status issues of borders, security, Jerusalem, and refugees within a year. The meeting will mark the first time that Israeli and Palestinian leaders have discussed these issues directly during the Obama administration.

### Road to the Announcement

A number of turning points led to Clinton's announcement. The first was President Obama's July 6 meeting with Netanyahu at the White House. In sharp contrast to past encounters, which were often strained, Obama called the meeting "excellent" and went out of his way to vouch for Netanyahu's sincerity: "We had an extensive discussion about the prospects for Middle East peace. I believe that Prime Minister Netanyahu wants peace. I think he's willing to take risks for peace."

Obama's uncharacteristic portrayal generated speculation that the Israeli leader had confided in him for the first time during the meeting -- specifically, about how he envisioned the endgame with the Palestinians. Previously, Obama had expressed sympathy for Abbas's reservations about opening seemingly futile peace negotiations, but after the Netanyahu meeting, he became the leading advocate for resuming direct talks.

At the same time, Obama listened to Abbas's insistence on support from Arab states before he could agree to such talks. On July 29, amid pressure from Washington, the Arab League publicly endorsed new talks, leaving Abbas to determine the start date. The endorsement stands in contrast to the league's standard recalcitrance about supporting even minor gestures toward Israel.

Some question the extent to which Obama's ardent desire for talks was driven by a Netanyahu policy shift rather than other factors. At the policy level, the president clearly views direct talks as beneficial to the United States at a time when the world is imposing sanctions on Iran to halt its bid for nuclear weapons. And at the political level, some have questioned whether the push toward talks is being driven by a desire to score a foreign policy achievement before the midterm elections. Others point to the fact that Israeli defense minister Ehud Barak -- a key interlocutor on Iran told Secretary Clinton during a July visit to Washington that he urgently needed peace talks or he would face a September Labor Party convention demanding that he leave the Netanyahu coalition.

### Settlement Moratorium

One issue could quickly derail the new talks if mishandled: the future of the ten-month-old West Bank settlement moratorium, currently set to expire on September 26. On Monday, Abbas's aides disclosed that he

had written a letter to Obama stating his intention to leave the talks if the moratorium is permitted to expire.

The intersection between settlements and peace talks is complex. In past interviews, Abbas admitted that he had insisted on a settlement freeze solely to avoid being outflanked by the Obama administration, which made such a freeze central to its public statements on the peace process beginning early last year. Yet in summer 2009, U.S.-led diplomacy resulted in a moratorium that exempted construction in east Jerusalem. Abbas deemed that outcome insufficient and refused to hold direct talks. Today, however, he insists that the moratorium is valuable and must be extended, believing that he will be criticized at home if he reverses course after months of refusal only to have construction resume throughout the settlements in September.

In Israel, amid considerable domestic political pressure, Netanyahu has indicated that the moratorium will not be extended. Yet this could simply be a means of extracting concessions from Washington and Abbas. On the latter front, Netanyahu may hope to secure renewed Palestinian pledges against incitement. The PA has shown significant progress in removing mosque imams who call for suicide bombings and identifying teachers who promulgate Hamas hatred in West Bank schools. Yet it has not made headway in cleaning up state-run media or quashing other highly visible forms of incitement (e.g., naming children's summer camps after "martyred" terrorists).

### **Continuity or Discontinuity?**

Many observers will no doubt compare the new peace talks with the last serious effort to make peace, beginning with the late 2007 Annapolis conference and continuing through Abbas's 2008 talks with former Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert. The latest relaunch will be more low-key than Annapolis, which was attended by top officials from across the Middle East. Senior U.S. officials correctly note that past high-profile ceremonies have not led to diplomatic breakthroughs, so repeating such pomp and circumstance in the current environment could simply heighten public cynicism. Yet the limited Arab involvement in the upcoming launch raises questions about U.S. and Israeli expectations regarding further help from Arab states after September.

Whatever the case, individuals close to Netanyahu have indicated that he wants to personally head the peace talks once the launch is over and the parties return to the region. This was the approach favored by Olmert, who believed that weekly meetings with Abbas were the best way to focus on principles. Similarly, Netanyahu does not want the talks to become a three-way affair with U.S. mediators constantly in the room. This approach does not reflect a desire to exclude Washington -- U.S. officials will be deeply involved in the overall effort, and both Abbas and Netanyahu will brief them regularly. Rather, Netanyahu's "close hold" on the talks should be seen in a domestic context, with the prime minister looking to avoid leaks that could turn into political dynamite and trigger the dissolution of his government.

### **Substance of the Talks**

Netanyahu has signaled his willingness to discuss border demarcation as a function of reaching satisfactory understandings on security. In particular, he wants to ensure that the arms smuggling seen in Gaza will not be repeated in the West Bank. Various parties have shown guarded optimism about bridging differences over these issues.

There is less optimism about the other two, more highly charged final-status issues: Jerusalem and refugees. This helps explain why the negotiations will initially focus on borders and security. At the same time, the administration showed ambition in putting forward a one-year timetable to resolve all issues. Many may criticize that decision, arguing that the White House has raised the stakes beyond what is warranted. In all likelihood, however, the current Palestinian and Israeli domestic environments would have hindered any efforts aimed at a partial solution declared in advance of the talks, regardless of their actual progress. Both sides have been hesitant to yield leverage prematurely in order to pursue such an approach. Others will criticize the one-year timetable as being too ambitious, yet Netanyahu himself used the year target date in a

recent speech in New York.

### **Domestic Political Contexts**

Given the issues on the table, it is important to look at the domestic political situation on each side. Ironically, past failures and low public expectations could give both leaders more room to negotiate than expected. And if members of Netanyahu's coalition decide to make his negotiations difficult, he has the option of either inviting the twenty-eight-member parliamentary opposition Kadima Party to broaden his government or opting for early elections.

Some critics argue that any talks are doomed without Hamas participation. Implicit in this critique is the belief that the group could actually be convinced to support negotiations. Hamas officials have already denounced the new talks, however, and Abbas has made clear that the group is not even interested in reconciliation with him, let alone Israel. He also noted that Iran continues to give the group some \$500 million per year. In other words, Hamas is unlikely to support a constructive resolution until Iran's regional influence is curbed, and even then it may prove intractable.

### **Conclusion**

President Obama was pivotal in helping Netanyahu reach his objective of direct talks. What actually occurred in the Oval Office during their July 6 meeting will become evident during the course of the new negotiations, as we find out whether Netanyahu and Abbas will move toward each other.

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