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The Resumption of Direct Talks between Israelis and Palestinians in September 2010

Israelis and Palestinians resumed their direct peace talks in the presence of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Washington September 2, 2010. These were the first face-to-face negotiations in nearly two years. The negotiations began with a White House dinner hosted by U.S. President Barack Obama the evening before. Attending the dinner were Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas as well as Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and King Abdullah II. of Jordan and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, in his position as representative of the Quartet for Middle East Peace (the US, Russia, the EU and the United Nations).

The resumption of direct talks was largely the result of intense pressure exerted by the U.S. administration with the ultimate goal of forging the framework for a lasting and peaceful solution within a one-year time frame. With Obama facing congressional elections in November, it is very important for him to demonstrate his Middle East policy has moved from ideas to concrete results, despite the fact that the two main protagonists only reluctantly agreed to engage in the talks. Yet, neither Mahmoud Abbas' Palestinian Authority nor the Israeli government can afford to resist political pressure from Washington in the long run.

At the White House dinner prior to the formal opening of the talks the following day, Netanyahu surprised the attendees as he addressed Abbas with the words: "President Abbas, I see in you a partner for peace" adding that it was up to the both of them to end the torturous conflict between Israelis and Palestinians and "with the help of our friends" make a fresh start. He had never said anything like that before. Time and again the Israelis had persisted that there is no Palestinian partner for peace. And then he added that it was his objective to find a compromise, a historic reconciliation "that will enable our people to live in peace, security and dignity". Promising words that will hopefully be translated into still more promising political action.

On the Palestinian side, only the West Bank Palestinian leadership is taking part in the negotiations. The Hamas movement, which controls the Gaza Strip, categorically rejects them. Indeed Hamas militants attempted to thwart the peace talks in their usual manner, carrying out a deadly attack on 4 Israeli settlers near Hebron the day before face-to-face talks were to resume. Despite this incident, which in the past would inevitably have led to an abrupt end of the negotiations, both sides agreed to meet at the highest political level every two weeks.

In the presence of Hillary Clinton and US Middle East envoy, George Mitchell, the talks continued as planned in the Egyptian resort town of Sharm al-Sheikh, September 14 and Jerusalem, September 15. The main issues on the agenda were the borders of a future Palestinian state, the future status of Jerusalem and Israeli settlement policy. The issue of

the West Bank settlements in particular may well lead to a premature abortion of negotiations. Mahmoud Abbas is threatening to break off the talks if Israel refuses to extend its construction freeze in West Bank settlements after it expires on September 26, 2010. The Israeli government had announced a 10-month halt to settlement construction in the West Bank on November 25, 2009. Until now, Netanyahu had excluded an extension of the freeze.

The present subject – the resumption of direct talks with the Palestinians – currently dominates Israeli media and the country's public discourse. Below we post the perspectives of two renowned actors in this debate, which reflect the wide spectrum of Israel's internal debate.

Dr. Yossi Beilin, former chairman of the Meretz party and key architect of the Geneva Initiative, arrives at the conclusion that the desired goal – a solution for peace within the frame of one year – is not attainable under the current political leadership. He does view Mahmoud Abbas as a man of peace who does indeed seek a political solution to the conflict, but he argues that Abbas is neither a “natural leader” nor one who possesses the political strength to enforce such a desired agreement within his own ranks. Beilin further argues that Benjamin Netanyahu is not willing to pay the price to achieve peace – especially not if that price is the division of Jerusalem.

Moreover, rather than resolving the Middle East conflict, Netanyahu's political top priority is the threat posed by Iran. According to Beilin another major obstacle to finding a permanent solution to the conflict lies in the Palestinians' internal political division and the fact that the Hamas-controlled Gaza strip would not be part of a peace settlement. Beilin claims that the direct talks came about solely because both sides wanted to avoid a deterioration in their relations with the U.S. Positive that there is no chance of these peace talks to succeed, Beilin proposes an alternative, partial agreement. Pursuing this line of thought, he argues that a temporary agreement should include a Palestinian state with temporary borders as well as a further Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank resulting in an expansion of the Palestinian areas of control.

Prof. Efraim Inbar of Bar Ilan-University also expressed scepticism regarding the outcome of the recently resumed direct peace talks. He notes that the Obama administration in particular placed tangible progress in the Middle East peace process high on both its domestic and foreign policy agendas and consequently exerted immense pressure on both the Israeli and the Palestinian sides. According to Inbar, the main stumbling blocks for fruitful talks are in the main protagonists' political structures and diverging expectations. He suggests that the Palestinian leadership is more interested in a continuation of the conflict than in the resolving thereof, adding that the conflict may well be misused both as a justification to continue obtaining generous financial aid from the international community and to purposefully delay the democratization of the Palestinian society. Since the Palestinian Authority (PA) is not able to prevent terrorism, as it does not possess a monopoly on the use of force, and considering the depth of the political rift between the PA and Hamas, Inbar believes the present talks cannot render a solution to the conflict. For his part, Inbar believes in a strategy of conflict management that would seek to curb terrorism, restrict human suffering on both sides and avoid escalation of the conflict.

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What should be done? What can be done?

Dr. Yossi Beilin

The speeches heard at the Washington Summit at the beginning of this month were nice. The common denominator sounded impressive. No one tried to hurt the other. The speakers sounded convinced of their ability to promote the peace process. Nevertheless, no serious commentator assumed that there was the remotest chance that the present talks could steer the parties to peace within one year.

The move from “proximity talks” to direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians is not the result of a breakthrough in the talks so far. On the contrary, nothing happened in those talks except that the Palestinians stated their position on the permanent settlement and Israel its security demands. The escalation of the talks stems primarily from the American administration’s wish to prove – before the impending Congress elections, in which the Democrats will lose their majority – that something positive is happening in the Middle East, and from an effort to prevent the deterioration of the situation in September, when Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) intends to demand a decision in the UN General Assembly regarding the Palestinian-Israeli permanent settlement and to embarrass the US, which will have to weigh the possibilities of its basic accord with the Palestinian suggestion and its reluctance to create a rift with Netanyahu’s government. At the end of the month, the 10-month partial building freeze in the territories is about to expire. Renewal of the building could create tension in the area and deteriorate to violence. It is reasonable to assume that the renewed talks will prompt the parties to avoid unilateral steps, and thus, time will pass quietly until November. But, this is a short-term step that might cause undue damage later on, because there is no chance that the talks starting today could reach their target within a year (or any other period): a peace agreement between the parties. If true progress is the goal, not just one more ceremony, the target of the talks must be changed.

What should have been done?

The 17 years since the start of the Oslo talks is a long period of time, way longer than our initial estimate. It passed without a peace agreement, because there were people on both sides who made every political or violent effort to thwart it. They were a minority in their

respective nations, but their determination helped them vis-à-vis the silent majority that wanted a quiet life and economic prosperity. But throughout these years, and due to the efforts to reach a permanent settlement, there is an accord regarding the permanent settlement, extensive work has been done on the details of a possible settlement, and the gaps between the parties have been narrowed. If there were a sincere will to reach compromises – it would not be necessary to invent them. They exist in President Clinton’s December 2000 parameters and in the (informal) Geneva initiative of 2003, which is based on these parameters, in President Bush’s 2003 “Road Map” and in the 2002 Arab initiative.

If all the parties were willing to roll up their sleeves, to make a supreme effort to solve the conflict and to agree to mutual concessions – there would be no need to set a time limit. A few months would be enough to reach a mutual agreement. As the issue of the border is the least complex (the basis should be the Green Line with territorial exchanges so that Israel can annex some settlement blocs that constitute a few percent of the West Bank), and the security arrangements are not too complex (the Palestinians would agree to an unarmed state, with a strong police force, and to Israeli warning posts – but no Israeli army – on their land), and as the fate of the Jewish settlements would be a function of the border between the two countries – the main compromise would have to be over the two most emotional issues: Jerusalem and the Palestinian refugees. Israel would have to agree to the division of East Jerusalem and the Palestinians would have to concede their demand that every 1948 Arab refugee and his descendants could return to Israel. Both parties have long accepted these concessions. Moreover, these would be but virtual concessions: East Jerusalem is today already under the influence of the Palestinian Authority, its citizens elect their representatives to the Palestinian Legislature, and Israeli authorities are precluded from significant parts of East Jerusalem. As to the Arab refugees – their majority is immersed in the countries they live now, and have no interest in becoming Israeli citizens, were it possible.

Had the parties really been willing to try and bridge the gaps, they would have commenced talks in the spring of 2009, shortly after Obama’s and Netanyahu’s administrations were established (open talks, or perhaps – even better – secret talks), brought up all the

issues they were committed to discuss, simultaneously, and solved them themselves or with the help of the Americans. But that's not how it is. The parties do not want to or cannot reach an agreement. The real question is whether it's better to wait for new leaderships or to try and adjust the goals of the present talks to the existing leaders, assuming that one cannot know who will take their places in the future or when, and that time is detrimental to whoever wants to achieve a peace agreement in the Middle East.

The leaders

President Obama came into office with all the best intentions. During his campaign he said that it wasn't necessary to be a Likud party member, to love Israel. He has proven it throughout his presidency, but he has made severe mistakes so far, and has thus lost some of his ability to influence the sides; both because of diminished support at home and because the world has realized that there is too big a gap between his wonderful, liberal, peace-loving speeches and his hesitant actions. He demanded that Israel completely freeze building in the West bank in order to start talks with the Palestinians, but didn't have the strength to insist. Long months were wasted on exhausting negotiations over a "partial freeze" and then months later the "proximity talks" with the Palestinians began. Such talks are usually intended for parties that will not talk to each other, not for parties that have known each other for many years and who have talked frequently over the last 17 years. The appointment of former Senator George Mitchell was another of Obama's mistakes. He should have appointed someone who lived in the area and would not leave the sides alone; not someone who comes to the region occasionally, has many other missions (for example, the Turkish flotilla), and acts like a Foreign Minister who meets with heads of state, rather than sitting down with the sides to try to achieve a breakthrough in the negotiations.

After the elections in November, which will diminish the strength of the Democratic Party, Obama will be weaker and will find it hard to coerce the sides to achieve a breakthrough. There is no doubt that his efforts are commendable and that he could have played an important role in a situation in which both parties can and want to, but this is not the case. Therefore, it is obvious that he isn't doing enough, and that in the future he will find it more difficult to do what he hasn't done so far.

Mahmoud Abbas is not a natural leader. He became president because of his seniority in the PLO, not because he wanted it. He is a man of peace who believes that a permanent Palestinian-Israeli settlement is a national Palestinian interest. He believes that Palestinian violence will achieve nothing, and was one of the only PLO officials who looked Yasser Arafat in the eye ten years ago and told him that he was wrong not to make an effort to end the Intifada. With the Palestinian Prime Minister, Salam Fayyad, he restored law and order and economic development to the West Bank. At one stage he believed there was a chance to move towards peace with former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, and revealed his pragmatic stance regarding all issues of the negotiations. These viewpoints surprised Olmert, who thought that they were a basis for an agreement. Abbas did not reach a settlement with Olmert because the elections were around the corner and Olmert, who was also facing criminal trials, was not a candidate for Prime Minister. Abbas knew that Tzipi Livni would not accept Olmert's compromises, primarily about the Palestinian refugees, and did not want to create a situation in which his conciliatory position would become the opening position vis-à-vis a new Israeli government after the elections.

He is not standing for reelection as President of the Palestinian Authority (he was elected in January 2005 with 62% support), and is continuing his term of office although it officially ended when the Palestinian Parliament was dissolved. His government is operating without a parliamentary mandate and by presidential orders only, whereas Gaza is governed separately by Hamas since 2007 without Abu Mazen's government's involvement (apart from payrolls for some civil servants). His constant mood is of one more than willing to return the keys; his sudden resignation will surprise no one and there is no heir-apparent. He does not believe that negotiations with Netanyahu could bring peace, and his main work is vis-à-vis the US administration, which he cannot disappoint: it is a source of financial and political support. As one who symbolizes discussion, his aim is to prove to his opponents in the Palestinian camp that the political road – with Israel and with the US – will secure the Palestinians more advantages than a pathetic attempt to use force.

Benjamin Netanyahu came to his second term of office with the same ideology and with much less energy. It

seems as if the fact that he was reelected, despite the huge failure of his first term, satisfies him and makes him do anything to remain in office. His actions are cautious, his speeches are few, and he remains uninvolved in many issues that he should be involved in, he avoids confrontation, he has no interest in military conflicts, and he is unwilling to pay the price of peace. His main concern is the development of the Iranian nuclear bomb, and many of his moves are aimed at thwarting it.

He, just like Abbas, is operating primarily vis-à-vis the American administration. He understands that a conflict between Israel and the US is diametrically opposed to Israel's national interests in general, and in the Iranian aspect in particular. He wants to be active in the Israeli-Palestinian context, so that the Americans accept his way and so that the blame for any failure falls to the Palestinians.

The Bar Ilan speech, in which he addressed the two-state solution for the first time, stemmed from his assessment that Obama might pressure him drastically and that such a speech might minimize the pressure. There was nothing historic here. Ariel Sharon, as a Likud Prime Minister, declared his support for a Palestinian state in his famous Latroun speech. The novelty was that this time it was Netanyahu. Netanyahu's claim was that if the Palestinians wanted to declare autonomy in some parts of the West Bank, the security of which would be Israel's responsibility – he was not against it. But in his election campaign he was adamantly opposed to the establishment of a Palestinian state. He may have been keeping the option to compromise on this issue for a much later time in his term, and found himself revealing his cards too early for him. If he completes his term of office fully, with no concessions to the Palestinians and no crisis with the US – he will see it as a major achievement. He does not think that time is acting against Israel's interests, and is unwilling to view the demographic issue as an urgent matter.

Netanyahu cannot afford to reveal his detailed opinions, because he knows there is a large asymmetry between him and Abbas: When Abbas presents his position, it is the global consensus. When Netanyahu presents his position, he will remain alone. Even the US will not be able to stand with him. If he has no intention of retracting everything he has stood for throughout his

political life, written in his books and spoken publicly about – he will spend the year of negotiations trying at any price to avoid reaching the moment of truth, as he did during his first term of office: He coined the phrase “If they give, they'll get”, and as he was the judge, he determined that the Palestinians gave nothing, so Israel was exempt from fulfilling its obligations to reach a permanent settlement in May 1999.

Why is it impossible to reach a permanent settlement now?

The Gaza Strip is an essential part of any future peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. The Oslo Accord specifically states that the West Bank and Gaza are one entity, with one solution. At the present, Mahmoud Abbas does not represent the Gaza Strip and cannot speak for it. Because Gaza is currently out of the game, the so-called “safe passage” – the corridor between the West Bank and Gaza that was promised by Menahem Begin in the Camp David Agreements – cannot be created. What is more, the territory exchanges between Israel and the Palestinians cannot be implemented, because most of the land that is to be transferred from Israel to the Palestinians should be in the area surrounding Gaza, and no Israeli government would ever agree to increase the space ruled by Hamas. An agreement between Israel and the PLO might only be a “shelf agreement” signed by the parties, implemented in the West Bank, with no territory exchanges, and await a change in the Gaza situation. The previous government was prepared to do it, but Netanyahu's government will not agree to such an arrangement. It would not be difficult to defend a standpoint that is diffident about shelf agreements.

What can be done?

One possibility would be to say that if serious negotiations for a permanent settlement are not likely, it's best to wait for the next leaders, and meanwhile make do with local improvements wherever feasible. But time is not working in favor of those who desire peace. Realities may make any future implementation of a permanent agreement very difficult, and there are those who would create more real facts. We also do not know, obviously, whether future leaders will be more moderate, so the waiting might be in vain.

The second possibility is to try and achieve a partial agreement under the present circumstances. This means executing the second part of the “road map” (a

Palestinian state with temporary borders) or the third part of the 1995 interim agreement, which referred to a third Israeli withdrawal prior to the permanent settlement, and which would expand the dominion of the Palestinian Authority.

Neither party is happy about this. Netanyahu prefers a permanent settlement, because only that can put an end to the claims and the entire conflict. Abbas is afraid that any interim agreement will become a permanent one, without solving the issues of Jerusalem and the refugees. Both will need guarantees if they are to be satisfied with a provisional agreement. The guarantee for the Palestinians could be a US presidential commitment to the principles of a permanent settlement and to a schedule. The guarantee for Israel might be partial implementation of the 2002 Arab initiative (non-diplomatic delegations, freedom of travel for Israelis to Arab countries, etc.).

This is far from being an ideal solution. But, it is preferable to the almost certain failure of talks impersonating permanent settlement negotiations, which might end in frustration that would enhance the mistrust between the parties and prevent any further security coordination, economic cooperation and so on. Both parties can do it. They have an enormous responsibility. The US had best lead them towards the more humble challenge, rather than push them into an impractical and dangerous move.

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Renewal of direct talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority

Prof. Efraim Inbar

The US succeeded in orchestrating once more a diplomatic ceremony on September 2, 2010, marking the renewal of direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. After nearly two years of futile mediation efforts and indirect negotiations the US ignited some hopes for ending the protracted conflict.

American diplomacy can rightly claim that the opening of this stage constitutes a step forward since only direct negotiations can produce an agreement. President Barack H. Obama, characterized by his "Yes, We Can" slogan, has displayed greater optimism than the previous president in his approach to intractable Middle Eastern issues. Obama can also use this foreign policy feat in his domestic political battles to minimize the feared losses of his Democratic Party in the coming November Congressional elections. A well publicized success, ephemeral as it may be, in the Israeli-Palestinian track can eclipse the very problematic American foreign policy record in Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, bringing the reluctant West Bankers to sit in the same room with the Israelis without any preconditions, as Netanyahu's government has insisted, has removed some of the criticism that concerned friends of Israel, many of them democrats, voiced at Obama's rough treatment of Netanyahu. Obama also desires to project an image of a president determined to bring significant change at home and abroad.

The beginning of direct negotiations is only a very small step, however. For the past 17 years since the Oslo Accords were signed, the venue of communication has never been the main obstacle. Israelis and Palestinians met face to face in many cities of the world. Ramallah, the seat of Palestinian government is only a short car trip away from Jerusalem and the telephone lines are working very well.

Similarly, the American commitment to achieve peace in the Middle East has never been questioned by the protagonists, and the US has consistently maintained a high degree of involvement. Moreover, it has increased its financial contribution over the years in its quest to minimize suffering. There are few pundits that call for

an US imposed agreement. Such advocacy ignores the limits of American power and determination. Generally, outsiders have limited ability to induce change in how Middle Easterners conduct their business, as recent American experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan indicate. Washington realizes it cannot impose a settlement and the US officials said it explicitly.

The real obstacles to peaceful co-existence are the existing political structures and the aspirations of the sides to the conflict. It is wrong to assume that the Palestinian Authority (PA) is really interested in transforming itself into a regular state and end the protracted conflict.

The deal Yitzhak Rabin envisioned in 1993 was territories for security (not peace). This is why he agreed to allow the PA to have a strong police force that could prevent the ceded territories from becoming a terrorist base against Israel. After realizing that the most it can get from the Arabs is "Cold Peace," Israel wants simply to be left alone and expects the PA to act like Egypt and Jordan and prevent terrorism from its territory. Unfortunately, to this very day the PA has failed miserably to meet this basic expectation. The primary reason for failure is the PA's inability to establish monopoly over the use of force in the territory it controls. This is the main test of a state. Yet, the PA is unable, and even unwilling, to confront armed Palestinian groups that their agenda includes the continuation of armed struggle against Israel. This is why Israel has no choice but to use its security forces to prevent terrorism from Palestinian controlled territories.

Moreover, Mahmoud Abbas and the ruling coterie of the West Bank have a vested interest in continuing conflict. Despite the exaggerated reports of misery and suffering among the Palestinians, actual life in the West Bank has improved drastically. As long as they can blame Israel for the all illnesses of their mismanaged society they can continue to draw generous financial support from gullible Europeans, for example. The conflict with Israel spares them the need to implement needed domestic reforms. It is no wonder that Prime Minister Fayyad Salam, a Western trained technocrat, has extremely little support in the streets of the West Bank. Last elections his party hardly secured two percent of the vote. His role is primarily to present the donors community a respectable face to ease the extraction of

additional foreign aid. The continuation of the conflict is not only intended to secure financial income. It involves an elevated international status. Only few state leaders meet the American president other world luminaries as often as Palestinian senior officials. The ongoing conflict awards publicity, recognition and many non-material rewards.

The continuation of the conflict also spares the Palestinians the need to recognize the legitimate historic rights of the Jews in the land of Israel. While Israel under Menachem Begin recognized the Palestinian legitimate rights already in 1978, the Palestinians still prefer to see the Jews as foreigners invading their country. Ideologically, it is very difficult for the Palestinians to see Israel as a legitimate Jewish nation-state, which is a necessary condition for reconciliation.

Another reason Abbas and the ruling band favor continuation of the conflict is in creating conditions that allow evading democratic elections in the West Bank and Gaza. The date for the planned 2009 Parliamentary Elections was simply ignored. The tenure of the elected Abbas as president ended in January 2010. The "occupation" by Israel is a good excuse for deviating from normal democratic procedures and for entrenching the authoritarian and corrupt PA regime. Amos Perlmutter, a famous political scientist termed the PA a Cleptokratia – an epitaph suitable for many third world countries.

The lack of democracy obviously weakens the legitimacy of Abbas and the political institutions he is associated with. This can be partly fixed by having a ruthless police, which is ironically trained by the Americans (we begin to see second thoughts in Washington on this issue). The lack of popular respect for the PA leadership, however, denies Abbas the needed political stature to reach the difficult decisions needed for a historical compromise with the Zionist movement.

The main reason for not holding elections has, of course, nothing to do with Israel. It is the fear that Hamas, an Islamist radical organization dedicated to impose the rule of Sharia (Islamic religious law) and totally opposed to the existence of a Jewish state, could win again (as it did in January 2006). The West seems to wisely forgo its preference for democracy in the

Palestinian case, but this is not enough to fix the main structural problem in Palestinian society and politics - the schism within Palestinian society between Islamists and proto-nationalists. Hamas, the ascending political force in Palestinian society, has taken over Gaza by force in June 2007, demonstrating that the PA more numerous forces hardly stand a chance versus the determined Hamas militia. The attempts to isolate and weaken popular Hamas have failed. Since the military coup, Hamas only entrenched its power by securing Iranian financial and military support. The divisions among the Palestinians created a new Iranian proxy, dovetailing the strengthening of Hizbollah in Lebanon.

Abbas does not succumb to Hamas pressure and remains in power in the West Bank primarily because of the forays of the Israeli security forces and military into the West Bank. These incursions, which are allowed by the Oslo Accords, are intended to continuously harass the Hamas terrorists in order to limit their ability to harm Israeli citizens, but are also weakening the Islamist opposition to the PA discredited regime. Abbas can hardly afford to put an end to the Israeli anti-Hamas military activity, which will no longer be acceptable if an agreement to end the conflict is reached. Abbas cannot reach an agreement that will leave him at the mercy of Hamas.

Indeed, the seemingly permanent rift between Gaza and the West Bank is the main stumbling block for progress in peace making. The competition between the political camps pushes the West Bank and Gazan political entrepreneurs toward even more extremist positions. In addition, even if somehow Abbas signs an agreement with the Israeli government in the name of the PA, he lacks any ability to prevent Hamas from sabotaging the agreement by launching Qassam missiles from its controlled Gaza Strip.

Finally, the gap in the positions between the rivals is too large to bridge. Simply put, the most any Israeli government can offer and stay in power is not enough for the Palestinians. There is a large support in Israel in favor of the partition of the Land of Israel in exchange for a peace agreement. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has a strong and stable coalition able to make significant territorial concessions to a future Palestinian state, including the dismantling of part of the settlements in Judea and Samaria. Yet, the Netanyahu government, backed by a large majority, is

adamant in rejecting Palestinian demands on the issue of refugees and Jerusalem.

The demand to allow refugees to return to their homes after six decades is a non-starter for most Israelis that perceive this demand as a means to destroy the Jewish state by inundating it with Arabs. Moreover, this demand is not rooted in any international law or custom. Furthermore, Israelis rightly refuse to accept moral responsibility for the refugee problem that was created as result of the Arab refusal to accept a Jewish state in 1948, in accordance with the UN resolution, and of the Arab states' military aggression against the newly born state.

Similarly, the Palestinian demand to gain control over Eastern Jerusalem and particularly sovereignty over the Temple Mount, the holiest place for Jews, is an obstacle to peace. From an Israeli perspective, the Palestinian claim to Jerusalem is unjust. After all, the Jews have been a majority in the city for over past 150 years and in accordance with the principle of self determination the majority is entitled to rule. In addition, Jerusalem has never been the capital of any Muslim political entity and the Al Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount is of secondary religious importance to the Muslim world. The Jews pray toward Jerusalem, while the Muslims pray toward Mecca. The insistence on East Jerusalem as the capital for the Palestinians seems strange as they never had a state before and no capital anywhere. The partition of a city also makes no sense, be it urban or political, when the trend is to unify cities such Berlin, Nicosia or Belfast. Finally, it is not clear at all that the Arab residents of Jerusalem desire to be part of the PA, which resembles in many ways a failed state, when the option to enjoy the benefits of being citizens of a democratic Israeli-ruled Jerusalem, with its first grade services, seems much more appealing. Actually, there are voices among the Arab residents of Jerusalem that call for a referendum trying to assert their right to choose the preferred political umbrella.

The PA, in accordance with the Palestinian national ethos, holds on to maximalist positions on refugees and on Jerusalem. Its flexibility is limited by the lack of pragmatism in its political culture. Moreover, it does not want to be vulnerable to Hamas criticism that they are selling out the Palestinian cause. Similarly, Israel's demand to be recognized as a Jewish nation state is utterly rejected by the Palestinian. Above all, clinging to

unreasonable demands serves the desire to continue the conflict. For strange reasons, Palestinians of a variety of political convictions, believe that time is on their side and that delaying the resolution of the conflict with Israel serves their interests. Continuation of the conflict, even at the expense of delaying the establishment of a Palestinian state, removes the need to accept the legitimacy of Israel and reduces the risks of a civil war.

Indeed the messages coming from the PA leadership, the PA media and its education system all indicate the need for continuous struggle against the evil Israelis. In order for the current round of peace talks to make any progress, there is a need to prepare the Palestinian public opinion for the possibility of compromise and concessions with Israel. Yet, incitement against Israel and the glorification of terrorists continues. The campaign to delegitimize and to demonize Israel does not allow the Palestinian leadership to make a deal with Israel. Moreover, the Palestinian leadership's message these days sounds more apologetic than conciliatory. The message is mostly aimed at justifying Abbas's decision to negotiate with Israel unconditionally. The PA is telling its people that it decided to go to the talks only due to heavy pressure from the Americans and Europeans.

Assuming the above analysis is correct, the prospects of the direct talks are slim. The PA will probably use the first opportunity to discontinue the direct negotiations. It threatens already to do so if Israel renews building in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem. This is a new condition in the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, as Israeli settlement activity has never prevented past negotiations. Indeed the issue of settlements has been blown up and exaggerated by the Palestinians. Israel has said in the past that it is willing to remove some settlements. Moreover, Jerusalem demonstrated the political capability to do so in 1981, when it removed Israeli settlers from Sinai in the framework of the peace treaty with Egypt, and in 2005 when it dismantled four isolated settlements in Samaria and all its settlements in Gaza. The Palestinian insistence on a settlement freeze as a condition for participating in negotiations serves, of course, the goal of preventing an end to the conflict.

The recent Washington conference is one more attempt to solve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute in a series of

long failed attempts. Unfortunately, not every protracted conflict has an immediate available solution. In the absence of a partner ready to make the necessary compromises for reaching a negotiated agreement, the appropriate strategy for dealing with the Israel-Palestine dispute is conflict management. The essence of such a strategy is to minimize the cost of armed conflict and preserve freedom of political manoeuvring. Its goal is also to buy time, assuming that the future may bring about better alternatives. The lack of a clear end goal is not inspiring; yet, this may be the best way to deal with a complex situation.

In operational terms, the goals are to contain terrorism, limit suffering to Israeli and Palestinian societies and prevent escalation. Foreign aid to Palestinians should be discriminate and focused. The dismantlement of additional isolated settlements could contribute to minimizing friction between Jews and Palestinians. This conflict management strategy requires patience, moderation and flexibility, and is fraught with uncertainties. It is a trial and error process tuned to the evolving regional and international dynamics.

As long as each side in enduring conflicts inflicts tolerable pain, the dispute does not end. Allowing the protagonists to bleed might be a better course of action than premature involvement in the long run. The international community has to realize that minimal action is often a virtue. Governments are blunt instruments and should limit their activities in the international arena to prevent humanitarian disasters. The US has restarted direct negotiations. If this step is part of a strategy of conflict management it is welcome; if it is motivated by grandiose designs its chances for success are problematic.

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