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On Proximity Talks

The proximity talks that entered its first round last week between the United States, the Palestinians and Israel respectively, are heavily influenced by the internal and external political dynamics of each of the direct stakeholders of the conflict: Palestinians and Israelis on the one hand and the United States, the European Union and the Arab States on the other.

The current policy of the United States can be viewed in three layers: first, there is the imperishable American (and European) concern to maintain the official recognition and the security of Israel as a state in the Middle East. From a US perspective, this official legitimate and recognized keeps the peace process alive. The second layer is to maintain and secure Fateh, the secular movement headed by President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) as the official accepted Palestinian partner to negotiate and sign possible agreements on behalf of the Palestinian people. The last, but not least, layer on the Washington agenda is the desire to “shake” Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu’s right-wing coalition government according to the motto “If we cannot change Israel we can change Netanyahu”. This does not come as a surprise, especially in the absence of President Obama’s strategy for a permanent solution. Hence, at this stage the US is left only with tactics to face the vanity and arrogance of Netanyahu, especially given his surreal delusion of power which has been fed by the support of the Jewish lobby in the United States, the rising number of Jewish Orthodox Generals in the Israeli military establishment, the half million settlers on the West Bank, and the weakness of the opposition in the Knesset (with regard to both, the Kadima as well as the Labor Party).

However, in order not to jeopardize US strategic interests in the Middle East in terms of oil and fighting Al-Qaida and Taliban “terrorism,” the US must have an active role to prevent the Islamists and fundamentalists from capitalizing on the unsolved Palestine Question. Therefore, American Generals serving in the region suggest that the US must intervene through public diplomacy with Syria, Lebanon, and Iran, and in these proximity talks, to strike a balance between the pressure of the Jewish lobby and Netanyahu’s obsession of attacking Iran on the one side and the stability of the Arab regimes and the human element of the suffering of the Palestinian people on the ground on the other.

The second main stakeholder is the PLO/PA, headed by Mahmoud Abbas. It is in favor of these proximity talks, hoping for the small “carrots” to be gained out of them, first and foremost among them the anticipated benefit of “isolating” the rival Hamas. Secondly, the talks would

help maintain the legitimacy and recognition of the authority of Mahmoud Abbas as long as the Palestinians are divided geographically and ideologically. Thirdly, they would keep the window of hope among the public for the two-state solution within the borders of 1967, and lastly, would maintain the European donors' support of Prime Minister Salam Fayyad's agenda aimed at institution-building and filling the political and economic vacuum in the in the West Bank.

The position of the third main stakeholder in these proximity talks - Israel - is complex and difficult to deal with since Prime Minister Netanyahu obviously challenges a battle with Washington by constantly putting his "nos" as preconditions on the table:

- a. No to freeze construction in "united Jerusalem;"
- b. No to halt settlement expansion in the West Bank;
- c. No to withdraw to the 1967 borders, especially from the Jordan Valley;
- d. No to lift the siege on Gaza Strip (thus transferring it into an Egyptian problem).

However, US special envoy George Mitchell keeps knocking on the door of Netanyahu as a means of political presence and pressure which will without a doubt have an impact on the general Israeli public opinion and the moderate part of the Israeli political arena.

The first round of talks witnessed the reintroduction of ideas for the transitional phase such as land swap, deployment of NATO forces to separate Palestinians and Israelis on the West Bank, as well as suggestions to bring Arab troops headed by Egyptians to Gaza to overlook Palestinian security reforms and reconciliation between Fateh and Hamas.

All the above pose the question of where these talks are heading? The Palestinian side asserts that the first round is to clarify the two parties' positions on two issues: (1) the borders of 1967 and (2) security "on the day after."

On the border issue there is agreement among the US, the EU, Arab states and the Palestinians (both Fateh and Hamas) that the ultimate formula for a settlement is the two-state solution based on the pre-war borders of 1967, i.e., the 1949 armistice lines. Meanwhile, the Netanyahu government, propagates recognition of Israel as Jewish state with Jerusalem as its capital and a border based on the separation wall, which would exclude the Jordan Valley (26% of the West Bank) as well as the half million settlers from a future Palestinian entity.

On the security issue, both the US and EU have been busy investing in educating, training and reconstituting the Palestinian (West Bank) security apparatus. Yet, it remains to be seen whether and how their funds are to be expanded to advance security reforms and reconciliation in the Gaza Strip as well. Other related and not less important issues are ending Israel's military occupation and dismantling the settlements.

It is becoming increasingly obvious that Netanyahu – insisting on the acceptance of natural growth in the settlements and the closing of the Jerusalem file (as there is nothing to be agreed upon) - is inviting the Palestinians merely for, as he puts it, an “economic peace”.

Referring to Israel’s continued settlement activities, especially in Jerusalem, and the army’s continuous atrocities (killing and arresting people and demolishing houses), President Abbas has warned George Mitchell from the outset that if things will go on as they are the talks will end before they even started. In turn, Netanyahu, demonstrating once again his talent for being a maestro of tactics and political survival, told Mitchell that he did not promise the US anything nor gave any assurances or guarantees, stressing that this would be his position as long as there are no direct negotiations.

In other words: while Palestinian expectations for concrete changes on the ground will most likely not be met, there is a further demonstration of US public diplomacy and of its political and military presence in the region to keep the protagonists active. The proximity talks are hence held hostage to the political dynamics in the region, i.e., the war of words between Damascus and Tel Aviv; the military maneuvers in Israel and in Iran; the attempts by the French and German foreign ministers to stop Syria’s support of Hizbullah; and finally the shuttle diplomacy of Egyptian head of Intelligence Omar Sulaiman to Tel Aviv in a bid to distinguish the fire before it erupts (most recently with regard to the Turkish solidarity ships heading for Gaza in an attempt to lift the three year siege on the Palestinian people).

Thus, the current state of affairs in Palestine and the region could be summarized as crisis containment management (rather than conflict resolution); however, the reading between the lines suggests that this is only a delay of the inevitable.