

APPROACHING PEACE: AMERICAN INTERESTS IN ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN FINAL STATUS TALKS

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IDEAS FROM U.S. EXPERTS

Robert Satloff (Ed.)

The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1994; pp. 47-50

Kenneth Stein

U.S. positions toward Israeli-Palestinian final status talks should avoid contradicting, diluting, or redefining two broader contextual objectives:

1) that future U.S. policies do not adversely influence the pace, content, or progress of other bilateral negotiation tracks, especially the Israeli-Jordanian, the Israeli-Syrian, and the Israeli-Lebanese negotiations; and,

2) that continuity is clearly maintained and all ambiguity averted in sustaining broader U.S. foreign policy objectives in the Middle East, which are themselves advanced through:

a) unwavering support for the political stability, economic strength, and strategic security of Israel, Egypt, and Jordan;

b) continued strong backing for the political stability and strategic security of Arab oil-producing states of the Persian Gulf (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, UA-E, Bahrain, and Oman);

c) enduring support for the political stability and strategic security of Tunisia, Turkey, Morocco, and Algeria;

d) enthusiastic and persistent diplomatic efforts toward the multilateral resolution of transnational issues such as water, refugees, economic development, environment, arms control, and regional security;

e) aggressive containment of policies and practices emanating from Iraq, Iran, Libya, and non-state actors that may be aimed at undermining regional stability and rupturing the Arab-Israeli peacemaking and peacekeeping processes; and,

f) determined willingness to embrace, with appropriate economic and technical assistance, a Syrian regime that gives clear evidence of its efforts to resolve Arab-Israeli differences.

As final status talks progress, U.S. policy in the wider Middle East will continue to be challenged by a series of indigenously-oriented issues, some of which will be more subtle in definition but dominant in scope, and others more episodically critical but less protracted in duration. These issues will inter alia include matters of political succession, domestic demographic challenges, tensions in inter-Arab relations, challenges of Islamic political movements, competing domestic demands for limited financial resources, deepening crises surrounding the spread of unconventional weapons, and the need for regional security and the slow movement from authoritarian to more democratic patterns of political participation and governance. In this context, the most important factors to affect the final status talks will be the internal configurations of the Palestinian component to the talks and the political orientation of Israel's future governments. It is highly likely that, at some immediate interval, neither Arafat nor Rabin will be at the helm of these negotiations.

In all of these areas, including the final status talks and other bilateral and multilateral Arab-Israeli talks, U.S. policy should be managed in a coherent and consistent fashion that could be defined as "catalytic laissez-faire." In defining outcomes that are commensurate with the two core objectives outlined above, Washington must be constructively engaged, but not intrusively

active.

Concerning the specifics of the U.S. approach to final status talks, a key starting point is the idea that an externally imposed outcome, artificially determined by parties not directly affected by the negotiations, will not be sustained over a prolonged time period. Washington, therefore, must avoid becoming either a source or an advocate of controversial new positions on any sensitive issues. The parties must decide themselves. However, if asked, Washington could provide "bridging" ideas to help reach acceptable accommodation between Israelis and Palestinians. Washington should also be prepared to ensure that the bilateral negotiating track is not adversely clogged by positions articulated by other third parties-including the United Nations, the European Union, Japan, the Vatican, or others- who may be inclined to intrude in the negotiating process, either substantively or procedurally. Should the final status talks reach an impasse for a period of time, Washington should be prepared to find ways, as it has since October 1991, to re-ignite the appropriate bilateral negotiations based on the common understandings or agreements achieved between the parties.

On the specific issues related to the negotiations, the legacy of U.S. foreign policy pronouncements is adequate. Here, repeated reference should be made to earlier American interpretations of UN Resolutions 242 and 338, the September 1982 Reagan Plan, and the letters of invitation to the 1991 Madrid peace conference. All four provide necessary definition of substance and, where required, appropriate constructive ambiguity. Washington's preferred outlines are clear; they should, if necessary, be restated regularly and without modification.

A key fundamental principle for U.S. policy should be to support negotiating processes and only advocate outcomes that are achieved through bilateral negotiations. Washington should be prepared to provide its good offices for mediation, and offer its own assurances and guarantees to the parties when appropriate. However, the United States should leave to the respective parties, as well as to states that must manage other issues, the prerogative to choose their own policy options.

Other than the principles enshrined in the traditional U.S. interpretation of the four documents mentioned above, Washington does not have additional strategic interests that require redefinition of either the broad outcome or the specific details of resolution of sensitive issues, like the future of Israeli settlements, repatriation of refugees, the final status of Jerusalem, demarcation of final borders, the political manifestation of Palestinian national expression, or the nature of the future association between Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian self-governing authority.

Finally, a point about time: it is important that final status talks be viewed as a process, not an act. There is no reason to force a clearly defined political or economic outcome from the final status talks or to do so within a specific time frame or "date certain." There is every likelihood that resolution of the sensitive issues noted above will not be mutually agreed upon in a satisfactory manner before the deadline is reached for the final status talks (May 1999). Progress toward resolution of these issues may itself be tied to a proposed series of future benchmarks on substance, which in turn may trigger as yet undefined conclusive outcomes. Inevitably, final status talks will be influenced by the local and regional issues, the political makeup inside Israel, within the Palestinian community, and, more generally, the ability to raise capital in international markets to help implement and sustain the agreements already signed, and those yet to be born.