

# Peace Talks Stymied, But West Bank Progress Can Be Made

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - February 2, 2012

TEL AVIV -- Last week in Amman, Jordan, negotiations -- or, rather, discussions about whether to resume negotiations -- between the Israelis and the Palestinian Authority ended. No discernible progress had been made concerning the West Bank, home to approximately 2.3 million Palestinians and about 300,000 Israelis living in towns and cities built by Israel after it seized the territory from Jordan in 1967's Six Day War. Although continued stalemate is not surprising, it is bad news and reflects the need for another approach.

Few Israelis paid attention to the Amman talks. Like most of the region, Israel is focused on the ramifications of the Arab Spring -- with Israelis keeping a close watch on neighboring Egypt, where the Islamists have won a large majority in parliament, and on neighboring Syria, where Bashar al-Assad's regime is tottering -- and on the showdown with Iran. Meanwhile, the threats emanating from Hamas-controlled Gaza and Hezbollah-controlled southern Lebanon, starting with the thousands of missiles capable of reaching Tel Aviv contained in the two arsenals, also seem more urgent.

Even as relative quiet and prosperity prevail among West Bank Palestinians, Israelis have grown exhausted by the persistent failure of the peace process to bear fruit. The widespread opinion in the country is that between Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas there is no able and willing partner on the Palestinian side with whom to negotiate a final status agreement.

Fayyad simply lacks much popular legitimacy in the West Bank. Abbas previously turned down a generous offer from Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in 2008. And last September, he repudiated direct negotiations with Israel in favor of grandstanding: In backing a United Nation's declaration of statehood, he embraced unilateralism, not a path to a real agreement.

Nevertheless, neither Israelis nor Palestinians can prosper over the long term without achieving progress toward peace in the West Bank. A substantial majority of Israelis know this but the country is divided about how to proceed.

Most agree that, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared in his June 2009 Bar Ilan University speech, the only just and lasting solution to the conflict is a comprehensive peace agreement based on the idea of two states for two peoples. They differ over what, in the short run, progress toward that goal requires.

The left-wing position, forcefully represented in the pages of the highbrow newspaper Haaretz, is that Israel should withdraw immediately from the entirety of the West Bank. Israelis living beyond the Green Line -- the boundary created by the 1949 armistice agreement between Israel and Jordan -- should be forcibly evacuated or left to fend for themselves under the rule of the Palestinian Authority.

The centrist view, championed by Kadima Party member and former Minister of Defense and Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz, advocates partial, unilateral withdrawal from substantial parts of the West Bank. Under this plan, Israel would hold on to the suburbs of Jerusalem and major Israeli population centers and control strategically critical areas, including a corridor in the Jordan River valley and perhaps peaks of the mountains that run from north to south.

The right-of-center view is the Netanyahu position. While having lifted many roadblocks in the West Bank and considerably eased other restrictions on movement, the government believes that any withdrawal at this time would be a mistake because it would increase security risks and, by giving without receiving, would encourage greater Palestinian intransigence. For now, Israel will have to muddle through, more or less maintaining current arrangements, leaving Palestinians to govern themselves as much as is consistent with protecting Israel from terrorist incursions, while concentrating in the near term on the Iranian threat.

In practice, the left-wing and centrist views have collapsed into the Netanyahu view, which fortifies the prime minister's comfortable majority. Neither leaders of the left nor the center can rouse their constituencies to support unilateral withdrawal, complete or partial. That's not only because Israelis are exhausted by the failure of negotiations to yield a comprehensive peace but also because they fear, with reason, that the fierce opposition to withdrawal among a small minority of West Bank residents and a few right-wing factions in Israel could provoke civil war.

But all three views are consistent with immediately stepping up efforts to cooperate with the Palestinian Authority to accelerate the building of the political, economic, security and, most fundamental, educational infrastructure of the emerging Palestinian state in the West Bank.

Cooperation between Israel and the Palestinians is nothing new. It has been a reality since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in the mid-1990s and it is on the agenda of Tony Blair, special envoy of the Quartet on the Middle East. Since serious disagreements -- over borders, refugees and Jerusalem -- between the Israelis and Palestinians persist and will, in the near term, frustrate the achievement of a negotiated peace agreement, development of the institutions of a future Palestinian state should be placed front and center.

Concentrating on development should not be seen as an alternative to the quest for a two-state solution, but rather as an alternative strategy for achieving that long-term goal. Nor is it inconsistent with maintaining regular lines of communication between the two sides. Indeed, close cooperation on many levels is indispensable to the enterprise.

Benjamin Netanyahu is well-qualified to lead such an effort. As minister of the treasury in Ariel Sharon's government, he successfully promoted free market reforms. He is a cultural conservative who appreciates that liberty and democracy depend on beliefs, practices and associations that teach respect for rights and encourage cooperation for mutual benefit.

And he is a Zionist who understands that since the Jewish state cannot reach its full potential while ruling over another people, it is in Israel's vital national security interest to assist the Palestinians in preparing for the challenges of self-government.

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