

**ANOTHER VIEWPOINT
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**IS THERE A NEED FOR A BREAKTHROUGH IN THE MIDDLEEAST PEACE
TALKS?**

Howard Adelman

Expectations for a Breakthrough. Professor Herbert Kelman of Harvard characterized the beginning of the Middle East negotiations in the fall of 1991 as having the “quality of a breakthrough”, but it was only with election of the Rabin government that the talks offered an actual opportunity. There were four reasons for this optimism: these were the first negotiations since the Geneva conference of the 1970s aimed at a comprehensive settlement; the Palestinians were at the table as an independent party, although appearing under the formal auspices of the Jordanian delegation; most of the Arab states, including the Gulf states, excepting Iraq, are part of the negotiations; and, finally, the United States is taking a very activist role.

Rabin stated that he wanted the negotiations to conclude with a peace agreement within a year. The Palestinians, though they welcomed Rabin’s election, did not expect any breakthrough because of Rabin’s “assertions of Israel’s commitment” to the Camp David terms of agreement. Some, in fact, found that his stance at the resumed negotiations fell even below their expectations. Not only did Rabin not change the make-up of his negotiating team, but the Palestinians “could not find anything that could serve as a good starting point for moving forward with the negotiations.”

The new United States administration expected and wanted a breakthrough. On the first day of the renewed peace talks following Clinton's inauguration, the Secretary of State invited the leaders of the various delegations to his office where he stressed the urgency of negotiating a breakthrough.

As the bilateral talks failed to achieve any significant breakthrough, Shimon Peres proposed focusing on the multilateral talks as a means to a breakthrough. He was afraid that, "if there is no breakthrough at the coming ninth round of bilateral talks in Washington, the process might unravel." We have to move ahead quickly, not only because time is running out, but because hope is running out." With the bilateral talks stalling, hopes for a breakthrough focused on the multilateral talks.

Issues. Why is there an asymmetry between the apparent expectations of the Palestinians and those of the Israelis and the Americans? Secondly, what is the relationship between the multilateral and the bilateral talks? Finally, can the multilateral talks produce a breakthrough?

These questions are critical to providing a context for any recommendations or proposals made by the participants in the multilateral talks. If there is an urgent need for a breakthrough, then the proposals made must be short term and have an immediate and direct impact on the talks. If, however, the need for an immediate breakthrough is misplaced, then more thoughtful and long term proposals can be formulated.

The Asymmetry of Expectations. The parties were very far apart when they entered the talks. The Palestinians wanted the talks and are using them to set a foundation for establishing a Palestinian state in the entire Occupied Territories, including East Jerusalem. The

Israelis entered the talks with the explicit condition that the negotiations would begin in the third year of that interim self-government.

In addition to the goals, the conditions driving the parties to participate in the talks are also very different. The existential plight of the Palestinians, particularly those living in the various Arab states had become desperate. In that sense, the Israeli closure of the Occupied Territories was merely a final blow in narrowing the options for the Palestinians. When the 20th Palestine National Council accepted the very stringent conditions for entering the talks in 1991, their major supporter, the former Soviet Union, had fallen apart. Their regional champion, Iraq, had been ignominiously defeated. Because of the stand the PLO had taken on the Gulf War the PLO had been estranged from its Saudi financial supporters and others in the Arab and European world. Further, remittances to the financial coffers of the PLO had begun to dry up with the expulsion of the Palestinians from Kuwait and other Gulf states.

One would have thought that the Palestinians would be far more desperate than the Israelis for a breakthrough, given the relative desperation of their position and the way in which Hamas was barking at the heels of the PLO. Certainly, they welcomed Rabin's victory over Shamir because they felt that now they could play chess instead of boxing. There was, however, a downside - the rapprochement between Israel and the United States.

But the PLO was not starry-eyed because of the election of Rabin. As viewed by Nabil Shaath, "the Rabin victory was a very important change in the political scene less perhaps for the victory per se than for the defeat - the resounding defeat of Shamir, the Likud, and the whole Greater Israel current," as well as for the new more dovish make-up of the Knesset.

According to a recent poll, a majority of the cabinet are now in favor of direct negotiations with the PLO.

Given the Palestinian goals, the assessment of the change in the Israeli government, and the changes in the Knesset and the outlook of the Israelis, the Palestinians were ready to enter the talks. They also felt that things could not get worse and they might be able to reestablish the credibility and recognition of the PLO in the eyes of the Westerners by participating in the negotiations.

On the other hand, the Israelis wanted to press their advantage. A quick conclusion to the talks on the conditions set by Israel and the United States would provide a basis for stability and long term security of Israel in the Middle East. Thus, the language of a “breakthrough” seemed more attuned to the Israeli stance than to that of the Palestinians. Thus, the Americans, perhaps because of temperament and the desire of the Clinton administration to concentrate on domestic issues, and the Israelis seemed to be aligned in expecting a breakthrough, while the Palestinians and others, such as the Canadians, had no such expectations.

The Bilateral and the Multilateral Talks. The multilateral talks were advertised as a complement to the bilateral talks to assist in developing an appropriate atmosphere and encourage small practical steps which could utilize the expertise, experience, knowledge, and resources of others to enhance the peace process (Option 1 - Complementarity). As the talks developed, Shimon Peres became convinced that the multilateral talks could serve as an alternate route to the same goal (Option 2 - Alternative). The multilateral might, at least, serve as a catalyst to allow the bilaterals to overcome obstacles (Option 3 - Catalyst). I myself have selected Option 4 - Parallelism, as I have come to interpret the multilaterals as fulfilling a parallel

purpose and operating on a parallel track to bypass the issue of a Palestinian state or political entity - the central political question. In addition I see them as helping to develop the conditions for a peaceful and prosperous Palestinian society, as a civil society with its sense of itself as a nation and a people. I see them also as a way to develop the relationship between all the parties to the negotiations and the limited but endangered natural environment in which they all operate and function. In this sense, the multilateral provide more than just atmospherics and small steps subservient to the bilateral talks.

If the multilateral talks have a complementary or a parallel function, then one cannot expect or even desire a quick breakthrough. If, however, they are expected to perform as a catalyst or as an alternative to the bilaterals, then expecting and desiring a breakthrough by that route is understandable. Given the variety and difficulty of issues at stake in the multilateral talks - that they will often be used as stalking horse for issues not being dealt with, that a wide gap exist between the positions of the main parties to the negotiations, and given my interpretation of the real purpose of the multilateral talks, I do not believe one can expect a quick breakthrough. Nor should the proposals and expectations of the multilateral conference be based on any such expectation.

If this analysis is valid, then the focus should be on projects that will enhance the economic variability of the Palestinian territories and serve as confidence measures for both sides. Thus, a bulk port in Gaza which would be of economic interest to Gazans, Israelis, and Jordanians, building the infrastructure for a network of industrial parts, humanitarian reunification of families, etc., are all steps which would enhance the long term viability and

financial security of the Palestinians and increase the level of trust between the contending parties.*

*Footnotes and references have been omitted for reasons of space.

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PALESTINE REFUGEES AND MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Don Peretz

As the Middle East peace negotiations enter the tenth round, one of the most difficult issues has yet to be confronted head on, that of the Palestine refugees. The problem is difficult not only because of its size, but because of its many complications including compensation, repatriation, resettlement, and economic rehabilitation.

Recent estimates place the number at over 2.7 million, approximately half the total number of Palestinians living in the Middle East and elsewhere. Almost half the nearly two million Palestinians under Israeli jurisdiction in the West Bank and Gaza, - the territorial base of a future Palestinian state - are refugees, as are a third of Jordan's three million inhabitants.

One of the five multilateral committees engaged in the peace negotiation deals with refugees, focusing mainly on alleviation of distress such as reunion of broken families, health measures and the like. The refugee issue cuts across most others in the conflict including Jerusalem; it is involved in the bilateral negotiations between Israel and Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinians; it is also related to the concerns of the four other multilaterals (water, economic development, environment, and security).

One of the most difficult and controversial problems is repatriation. But repatriation to where? Every Israeli Knesset faction from right to left except the two small Arab parties adamantly opposes the return of large numbers of Arabs to Israel; even Palestinian negotiators

have accepted the concept of repatriation in terms other than return to Israel. The territory of the future Palestinian state is already overburdened with refugees so it will be years before large numbers can be absorbed there. Jordan has taken in more than its share, especially since the 1991-92 Gulf War when some 300,000 Palestinians expelled from Kuwait found refuge in the Hashemite Kingdom. This leaves over 700,000 Palestinians in Lebanon and Syria whose future location has yet to be determined.

The compensation issue is no less a dilemma. Estimates of property abandoned during the 1947-48 war in Palestine range from a few to several tens of billions of dollars. However, the need to accurately evaluate that property, to locate its present owners, and to deal with Israeli counter-claims greatly complicate the issue. Most abandoned Arab property has long since been absorbed into Israel's economy, often passing through many successive owners. It has been classified and reclassified under a variety of Israeli land laws. Much farmland of fifty years ago is now urban with high rise apartments, business and government buildings. Property values of 1948 are no longer realistic. Many of the property and land evaluation records of mandatory Palestine have been mislaid or destroyed so tracing ownership is often difficult. Since property was owned jointly, some communally with many missing partners. Furthermore, much of land ownership in mandatory Palestine was not "settled" by cadastral survey, but according to old Ottoman customs that left many ambiguities and uncertainties about precise boundaries and location.

Israel has linked the problem of compensation to counter-claims by Jews from Arab countries, such as Iraq, Syria, and Egypt. There are strong pressures by Jewish immigrants from these countries to place their property claims against those of the Palestinians who departed in

1947-48. Estimates by some Jews from Arab countries place the value of the property abandoned in their former homes at more than that left by the Palestinians in Israel.

Given these complications, resolution of the refugee component of the Palestine conflict will take a long time and negotiations will be arduous indeed. The refugee problem will not be settled in a year or two, even after the parties sign peace agreements; its resolution will probably continue well into the twenty-first century. Nor can the problem be dealt with in isolation from the many other controversial issues yet to be settled in Arab-Israeli relations.

A substantial proportion of the refugees will have to be intergrated into communities where they now live; this means transformation of present-day refugee camps into more permanent, economically viable communities. However, such transformations cannot take place without an overall uplifting of the surrounding economies. Without major progress in economic development of Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza, there will be little possibility of ending refugee dependence on United Nations assistance. Thus, ending the refugee status of half the Palestinian community depends on regional economic development. One path to regional economic development with emphasis on the refugee problem might be to transform the United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA) from a welfare and relief organization into an agency for regional economic development. Since UNRWA was established in 1950 its expenditures have totaled more than \$4 billion, rising from \$33.6 million a year to nearly ten times that amount in 1992. The agency itself has already taken the first steps toward making refugees economically self-sufficient though vocational education programs and small loans to individual entrepreneurs.

An integral component of regional economic development is agreement on rational and equitable distribution of the area's scarce water resources. Present shortages are one of the many causes of tension in the region; dispute over the resources of the Yarmuk-Jordan system was a primary cause of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. While it appears that Jordan and Israel are close to agreement on distribution of water along their common border, agreement has yet to be worked out over the headwaters of the Jordan River. Regional agreement on water involves not only Israel and its Arab neighbors, but must include Turkey as well for it controls the principal water sources of both Syria and Iraq.

Transformation of the two dozen refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza, with nearly half a million residents, into economically viable communities is no small task. In addition to the half million camp residents, another 600,000 West Bank and Gaza refugees outside the camps must be provided with permanent homes and employment. One proposal for confronting this problem is resettlement of refugees in the more than one hundred Jewish settlements now located in the Occupied Territories. The several billion dollars invested in these Jewish settlements might be used in lieu of compensation payments for abandoned Arab property within the border of Israel. A large number of the more than 120,000 Jewish settlers in the Territories are there for economic rather than political or ideological reasons. With the conclusion of a peace agreement and establishment of a Palestinian self-governing political entity, the overwhelming majority of Jewish settlers might be enticed back to Israel with offers of inexpensive housing.

Obviously the cost of these long term refugee rehabilitation projects will reach hundreds of billions of dollars, far more than Israel, the present host countries, or the refugees

themselves can generate. However, the present international environment is not conducive to raising such sums. With proliferation of refugee problems around the world, in Somalia, Sudan, Cambodia, Kudistan, the Balkans, the needs of Palestine refugees are overshadowed. Nor is the current world economic recession conducive to the large contributions required from economic take-off in the Middle East. Although the West, especially the United States, was in large measure responsible for the problem, after half a century Americans have become indifferent to the plight of the Palestinians. The many demands of other conflict crises and the current world economic recession mean that the Palestine refugee problem will probably have to be resolved by Middle Easterners themselves.

Most funding, therefore, must be generated within the region, principally from the oil producing Gulf states and Libya. Another source should be reduction of the military expenditures by Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. Each of these nations is pouring down the drain several billion dollars a year in military expenditures. If each Arab nation and Israel were to reduce its military expenditure by ten percent a year for contribution to regional economic development, they will make it possible to absorb several tens of thousands of refugees within a decade.

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To Our Readers,

This issue of AVP ends the sixth year of its publication. It is also the last issue. For personal and technical reasons, AVP is suspended indefinitely. The experience has been educational, demanding, and quite rewarding, but it has become difficult to continue without outside support, which has not been forthcoming. We are grateful to those who have contributed articles, funds, and moral support, and we hope that the gap left by the suspension of AVP will be filled by some other medium with at least equal commitment to peace, equality, and harmony among all people.

Elias H. Tuma and Lori Aoun

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