

What's behind Abbas' decision to resume negotiations?

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The announcement by US Secretary of State John Kerry last Friday that Israel and the Palestinians reached an agreement to resume talks about final status issues after years of diplomatic standstill came as a surprise for many. While details about the exact content of the agreement remain private, Israeli officials declared that PA President Mahmoud Abbas' preconditions for the resumption of talks, including a complete settlement freeze on occupied land, Israeli recognition of the pre-1967 borders and the release of Palestinian prisoners, had been flatly rejected. What are the prospects of renewed negotiations given Israel's intransigence regarding these central and internationally recognized Palestinian demands? Most Palestinians consider negotiations a diplomatic cover by the Netanyahu government. Hamas and left-wing groups oppose the resumption of talks and declare that Abbas has no legitimate authority to negotiate on behalf of the Palestinians. Notwithstanding the profound skepticism that a new round of negotiations will in fact produce results, a culmination of personal, economic and strategic factors appear to have guided Abbas' calculations to embrace the Kerry mission and to agree to the resumption of negotiations.

Firstly, Abbas, envisioning a legacy as "the last PLO leader of the old guard", is convinced that a Palestinian state cannot be created through military resistance but only by political negotiation. Realizing that Western governments and international donor agencies expect him to take the chance to negotiate with Israel, it is particularly not in his interest to alienate the US after its extensive political investment in reviving the negotiation process. President Obama demonstrated continued support for the two-state-solution by personally urging Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu to commit himself to the Kerry initiative which, dependent on the PA's progress towards a peace deal with Israel, holds out a major investment plan for the Palestinians to boost their struggling economy. However, the fact that the Israeli government did not agree to any of Abbas' preconditions leads many Palestinians to fear that economic support could come at the price of political demands.

Two developments seem to have convinced Abbas that negotiations are still worth the risk. One is the American commitment to the pre-1967 borders with *minor* and *mutually agreed* land swaps. Another is the new political support by the European Union which, in a move that finally goes beyond the usual verbal criticism of Israel's activities in the occupied Palestinian territories,

adopted guidelines that restrict EU-funded programs to Israel in its pre-1967 borders. This “earthquake decision” as well as the ongoing debate about the labeling of products from West Bank settlements demonstrate that the EU, Israel’s largest trading partner, is becoming increasingly impatient with Israel’s continuing ‘colonization’ of Palestinian territory.

Secondly, by demonstrating goodwill to negotiate, Abbas reintroduces the Palestinian question into the domestic political discourse in Israel. It forces every Israeli to take a stand on issues critical to a future peace deal, including borders, Jerusalem and refugees. If Israel proves unwilling to negotiate in good faith, it risks further international isolation. At the same time, negotiations may cause a political crisis as various members of Netanyahu’s government coalition vehemently oppose any deal with the Palestinians, let alone a Palestinian state.

Thirdly, developments in Palestine and the Arab world put Abbas into a strategically comfortable position. Although being skeptical of Israeli intentions, the Arab League supports the Kerry mission and also upholds its own comprehensive peace offer of the year 2002, which Israel has ignored for years. By backing his stance on the resumption of negotiations, the Arab League legitimizes Abbas’ leadership and representation of the Palestinian people. Jordan has agreed to join and host the negotiations on final status issues, and also cooperates with Israel and the PA on various projects on the Dead Sea. Meanwhile, Hamas, the only serious challenger for Abbas’ Fatah movement, stands with its back to the wall as it has gradually lost most of its ideological allies as well as financial and military supporters, including Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and most recently Egypt. With neither Russia, Europe nor Saudi Arabia being willing to change their position vis-à-vis Hamas, Abbas believes he can capitalize on the growing isolation of its rival and dictate his personal terms for reconciliation, i.e. by threatening to go ahead with elections in the West Bank.

A range of personal, economic and strategic calculations led Abbas to agree to a new round of negotiations ten years after the launch of the Road Map (2003) and twenty years after the signing of the Declaration of Principles (1993) that led to the Oslo Accords. Looking at the situation in Palestine today, one may conclude that the Oslo Accords were never meant to be implemented. Subsequent negotiations meant swimming against the tide and failed as Israel never stopped entrenching itself in the occupied territories, actively obstructing the two-state solution. If John Kerry wants to open a new chapter of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, he will above all have to deal with the Zionist claim to *all* the land of Palestine; a claim that has been at the root of the conflict for the last one hundred years and has developed into an obsession of control.