

“Ramifications of Direct Negotiations”

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Introduction:

Palestinians and Israelis have returned to direct talks, in spite of Israel's continued intransigence. Palestinians are now assessing the ramifications of returning to peace talks as the weaker party and as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu shows no sign of letting up in his harsh stances, namely his refusal to extend the partial 10-month settlement freeze set to expire on September 26. In this spirit, Palestinians are wary that any real progress could be made, especially given the few alternatives that seem to be available.

In light of these factors, the question remains as to future expectations and outcomes. What are the local and international political options before us, especially given that the Palestinian leadership – upon invitation by the US - agreed to the talks without setting any solid terms of reference. Even the EU was sidelined from the process despite the Quartet's statement in support of the talks. Most importantly, the Palestinians went into negotiations without guaranteeing a halt to settlement expansion, especially in Jerusalem and the Jordan Valley.

All of these factors necessitate the formulation or at least assessment of a new political strategy that goes beyond mere reactions so that broader Palestinian interests are not harmed. So far, the many years of unfruitful processes have eroded the Palestinian political position. Hence, it is crucial to look at alternatives to the negotiations such as steadfastness on the land, resisting the occupation, working

towards holding Israel accountable and pursuing it legally for its crimes against the Palestinians within the framework of international law. Palestinians must also work at winning international public opinion towards recognizing the Palestinian right to a free and independent state.

Here, the real question is what do the Palestinians want from the negotiations, how should they be managed, how will we deal with their outcomes and what options lie before us.

Political options in our Palestinian reality:

- The principle concern is that a solution will be imposed on us by the Americans in spite of President Obama's pledge that the US is not interested in imposing solutions. Palestinians want solutions in line with international law. Since Israel is the stronger party in imposing solutions, we must strategically plan to resist any imposed and unjust solutions.
- Efforts must be exerted to rectify the framework of the negotiations, which have so far been faulty and imbalanced, through an exchange of commitments. The demand for a halt of settlements, for example has been something we retreated from by accepting to enter talks. Hence, the formula for negotiations at present is nothing more than a carbon copy of past formulas.
- Better preparing ourselves for how to deal with American pressure. Is it possible the PA and the PLO would be punished and weakened to the point of collapse if they refuse negotiations? In light of these issues, it would have been wiser for us to enter into direct talks with full Arab support and participation.
- While the current negotiating process has yet to give positive results towards reaching a reasonable solution, we should not assume the worst yet. There are different definitions to success and failure. However, before this can be measured there must be a change in policies, primarily in a return to international law.

Future Scenarios:

Locally: The Palestinian position has been eroded throughout the years including the nature of proposed solutions. Even with these concessions, Israel wants to start from zero so it can maintain its own gains. Hence, we have nothing much to lose so going to the negotiations is better than not going. One scenario would be for the negotiations to fail and to hold Israel responsible. This way we would prevent Netanyahu from holding us responsible for hindering the peace process while he improves his image to the world. Hence, Palestinians need to mobilize international support and act with the highest level of national responsibility and unity.

Popularly: Continue popular resistance without opposing a return to negotiations. Our steadfastness and popular resistance are important but are not ultimately a viable alternative. Our strategy is to continue adopting the 1988 political program of two states.

Regionally: The Iranian role and its impact on the Palestinian situation along with the lack of opposition to negotiations from Damascus pushed some Arab countries to lean towards direct talks and call for adopting the decision of the Arab follow-up committee to find a new political strategy. This includes extracting recognition of a Palestinian state from the Security Council. Unfortunately, the Arab stance is too weak to take such options seriously.

Internationally: Any international decision will be dictated by the US, which is not serious in its intentions – there is no desire on the American's part for a just solution, there are only interests. Indications show that the US has shifted to the idea of managing the conflict instead of solving it.

Recommendations:

- Going to negotiations does not necessarily mean it is on Israeli or American terms. It is possible to accept a reasonable solution we can live with even if it is not completely fair. This is still better than living in isolation. Regardless of whether the option of negotiations is sound or not, refraining from them is unrealistic in light of international pressure. It is part of our political battle.
- We need new negotiating teams. We have had the same teams since the beginning of negotiations despite their failure and despite the changing factors and changing negotiators on the other side. We also need a guiding political framework.
- Arabs should be brought into the equation to better formulate a comprehensive solution. We should not go alone in light of the current balances of power.
- Due to Israel's intransigence and lack of any real hope for the negotiations to succeed, we must reverse the pressure on us to the other side to halt settlements and the judiaization of Jerusalem so Netanyahu cannot win in his tactics of portraying himself as a peacemaker.
- We should not accept any transitional, imposed agreement or superficial framework in light of the failure to reach a final agreement due to the current balances of power. What is likely to happen is to reach an agreement on partial achievements satisfactory to the Palestinians. Still, we should be prepared to deal with this because the possibility of reaching a comprehensive solution is practically obsolete. Hence, we should engage in negotiations for tactical purposes such as using them as a tool to limit settlements.
- Restoring the credibility of the PLO internally, regionally and internationally and reviewing all our strategies and options.

- Continuing to demand a halt to settlements, which can be the only real indicator for any acceptable solution. There must be a final and unconditional halt to settlement construction, especially in Jerusalem.
- Mobilizing international support for the Palestinians in negotiations; working towards a final peace agreement with a timeline.
- Reinforcing the steadfastness of the people by all means; at present there is no popular support for the negotiations.
- We must manage our political differences within the perimeters of maintaining our political system without allowing anyone to use the call for national unity as an excuse for evading commitments.
- We cannot allow ourselves to be financially blackmailed; we must prepare ourselves for the coming phase by putting in place decision-making mechanisms and resisting the political and financial siege.