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NEGOTIATIONS: AN OVERVIEW**

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Revised version of an article published in UNIDIR Newsletter n. 21, April 1993

IAI9307

ISTITUTO AFFARI INTERNAZIONALI

THE STAKES IN THE ARAB-ISRAELI NEGOTIATIONS: AN OVERVIEW

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As memories of the Gulf War fade and images of the recurrent clashes in the Occupied Territories mingle with those of violence in the many other crisis-ridden parts of the world, one is justified in wondering why international diplomatic efforts are still concentrated on the Arab-Israeli peace talks. Why is solving the conflict between the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people and the right to security of the Israeli state still considered central to world peace?

The reasons for the continued importance of these negotiations lies in the regional and international implications of their success or failure. With the system of international relations in search of a new order to replace the bipolar arrangement that ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the outcome of the current transition phase will determine the new long-term global equilibria. In the meantime, international relations are characterized by a fragile system of multilevel interdependence. At the vertex of this system is the almost unipolar military power ensured by the United States and its major European allies. The center of the system is represented by the tripolar economic power of the United States, Western Europe and Japan, while the base of the system consists of a network of global interdependence laboriously managed by the large multilateral and regional organizations (United Nations, International Monetary Fund, GATT, European Community, etc.).

In short, the current international system is an unstable mixture of integrative and disintegrative forces. And the Middle East, with its age-old geopolitical and economic importance, is a test bed for the trends that will prevail in the new system. In particular, whether or not the post-Cold War system can solve regional conflicts peacefully and with the collaboration of the international community will be verified during the Arab-Israeli peace process.

From Somalia and Cambodia to the former Yugoslavia, the international system's regional crisis-management ability is already being severely tried. But none of these crises has received the kind of attention that is being directed at the Arab-Israeli conflict, and none has, over the decades, produced as many different forms and episodes of intervention.

The importance of international intervention in the Arab-Israeli peace process is underlined by the fact that the current peace talks are an offshoot of the Gulf War and that they are jointly sponsored by the United States and Russia, and by the political linkage between their bilateral and multilateral aspects.

Yet, despite the importance of international involvement in the peace process, its outcome will largely depend on internal Middle Eastern developments. The success of the economic readjustment policies already undertaken in various countries in the region, and the expansion of intra-regional trade, financial and migratory flows,

are decisive factors that can be supported but not created from abroad. That is why the participants of the negotiating group on regional economic cooperation, of which the last meeting was held in Rome in May 1993, are discussing mechanisms that can provide incentives for regional cooperation.

Regional economic cooperation cannot, however, develop in a belligerent and unstable political setting. This fundamental lesson seems to have been learned by the present Israeli government, given that Prime Minister Rabin, in his first speech to parliament, redefined the concept of national security--central to the Israeli conception of its conflict with the Arabs--declaring that the territorial dimension is not necessarily the only measure of a country's strength and that others, such as technological progress, economic power and political stability, are equally important.

Indeed, Rabin won the elections with promises of rapid economic recovery and expansion. But he knows only too well that will call for more than a full return to American aid. To effect those promises, Israel will have to open its economic borders and find a place for itself on wider regional and international markets (especially Europe).

The same kind of message--that the time has come to do away with archaic conceptions of nationalism--has been assimilated by the Palestinian leadership in the Occupied Territories (OT): it recently stated that the establishment of a territorial state--the main demand of the Palestinian people--is a prerequisite, but not the ultimate goal, of a nation that aspires to participation in the development of the present international system.

Both of these statements represent enormous steps ahead in the political perspectives of the two main actors of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Nevertheless, they have not been sufficient to accelerate the bilateral negotiations.

The main reason for the difficulties in the negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians--the fulcrum of the entire peace process--must be sought beyond the undoubtedly important contingent effects of the many regional and international events influencing the course of the negotiations: the turnover in the US presidency, the future of the Iraqi regime, etc. Apart from any historic responsibility, decades of procrastination weigh heavily upon the negotiations today: not only have the general political conditions in the Middle Eastern region deteriorated, but the very premises for peaceful coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians have been undermined.

In the past, the phrase, "time is on the Arabs' side" was often heard with respect to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The reference was to the more rapidly increasing Arab population which would eventually invert the balance of power between Israelis and Palestinians through sheer numerical superiority. But today, the time factor works differently. The Israelis can continue to temporize during negotiations, as the Begin government did until its fall, in the hope that the settlements in the OT will make any kind of territorial concessions impossible. Or they can procrastinate in hopes of forcing the Palestinians and, therefore, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, to accept a minimal compromise. This is, in some ways, what has happened since the new Rabin government has come to power: after presentation in August 1992 of the respective proposals for the establishment by means of election of a Palestinian interim self-governing authority (PISGA) for a temporary five-year period, no further substantial progress has been made in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations as of mid July 1993. In particular, while the Palestinians proposals spell out clearly that the transitional period must lead to a final settlement based on UNSC resolutions 242 and 338, the Israelis negotiate the interim arrangements without pledging themselves to any specific

settlement after the five years period.

But time no longer favours either side. The radicalization of the Palestinian Islamist movement is the most obvious demonstration of this. Radical Islamism has found the same fertile terrain in the OT that has favoured its growth in the rest of the Middle East: the inability of lay national movements to achieve their declared objectives of political independence and economic well-being, repression by authorities of all political opposition, and condescendence towards the religious movements that represented a natural counterbalance to lay opposition.

However, religious radicalism among the Palestinians is now laced with violent intransigence towards any kind of compromise with the enemy and is manifested in forms of racism that are matched only by the extremist anti-Arab racism of the parallel and symmetrical Jewish movements, such as the Gush Emunim and the followers of the late Rabbi Kahan. These are the political forces that are benefitting from stagnating negotiations and are reducing the room for manoeuvre of the parties engaged in negotiation.

If these forces gain the upper hand, the Middle East will witness spiralling violence, made even more lethal by regional armament levels. Neither the precarious processes of regional political and economic liberalization already under way in the region, nor the already overburdened structures for international intervention would be able to stop it. For this reason, it is essential that negotiations not only continue, but accelerate, so that they conclude before the regional and international cooperative forces fuelling them are depleted.