

US Reactions to the recent Israeli–Palestinian peace initiative

As Israel and the Palestinian Authority, led by the U.S., resumed direct peace talks after 20 months, many Israelis and Palestinians already agree on one point: Chances for success are slim, and many U.S. politicians and analysts share the same skepticism. The fact that President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu are meeting face to face is not considered a breakthrough, but that closing the longstanding gaps in their positions and rebuilding shattered trust would be.

At the same time, Hamas, the militant Palestinian faction that controls the Gaza Strip refuses to recognize Israel, immediately rejected the peace talks, and some now worry that Hamas may boost its campaign of violent resistance to sabotage the process. Hamas has long refused to disavow the use of violence, and will not abide by any peace deal reached.

For Fatah, led by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, another round of failed peace talks could spell political disaster. President Abbas has bet his career on renouncing violence and pursuing peace talks with Israel. But after nearly two decades of negotiations, Palestinians still have no state and frustration on the streets is high. A one-year time limit, as proposed by President Obama, is crucial to bringing President Abbas to the negotiating table. If the talks fail to produce results, Palestinians have strongly hinted that they plan to unilaterally declare statehood and seek recognition from the U.S. and other nations.

With regards to Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the last year has sent mixed signals. Bowing to U.S. pressure, he publicly endorsed the idea of a Palestinian state for the first time and imposed a 10-month moratorium on most new housing construction in the West Bank. But housing projects in disputed parts of Jerusalem have increased during his tenure. Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman has declared that he didn't foresee the creation of a Palestinian state within the next decade.

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Throughout the negotiations, the Obama administration will continue to behave in a very cautious way, cognizant that leadership is needed to ensure negotiations progress but also wary of getting too involved in a process memorable only for its failures.

Reactions to this new round of peace talks and the prospects for success have varied.

President Obama remarked, “The hard work is only the beginning. Neither success nor failure is inevitable. But this much we know: If we do not make the attempt, then failure is guaranteed. If both sides do not commit to these talks in earnest, then the long-standing conflict will only continue to fester and consume another generation, and this we simply cannot allow. With regards to the extremists who may try to hijack the peace process, the message should go to Hamas and everybody else who is taking credit for these heinous crimes (referring to a recent killing in the West Bank) that this is not going to stop us from not only insuring a secure Israel but also securing a longer-lasting peace in which people throughout the region can take a different course.”

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry said, “A viable two-state solution is in the vital national interest of Israelis, Palestinians and Americans alike, and can serve as a transformative event in the Middle East. Everyone understands the stakes involved and the magnitude of the challenges ahead. Overcoming these challenges will require courage, vision, and the tenacity from leaders on all sides. I commit to doing whatever I can as Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to support the Obama administration in this critically important endeavor.”

House Committee on Foreign Relations Chairman Howard Berman said, “The Palestinian and Israeli leaders have worked hard to improve conditions on the ground over the past eighteen months, and I hope the success in the security and economic realms will have a positive impact at the negotiating table, where a spirit of goodwill, compromise, and empathy will be critical in achieving a solution. Progress in these talks will depend on the ability of the respective leaders to make courageous decisions in the face of domestic political challenges and efforts by terrorists and extremists to derail the process, such as yesterday’s tragic shooting in the West Bank. In particular, it is critical that the leaders take personal charge of these talks

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and commit to persistent, uninterrupted efforts to reach a solution, including an end to conflict and claims. There will always be excuses to walk away from these talks, but the real test of statesmanship for both Israel and Palestinian leaders will be to rise above day-to-day developments and maintain their focus on achieving a long-term, sustainable peace. I offer Israelis and Palestinians my strong support as they pursue these direct negotiations which have the potential to create secure and prosperous nations, side by side. While I'm under no illusions as to the difficult nature these negotiations will pose, I am pleased that President Abbas has finally accepted Prime Minister Netanyahu's longstanding offer to move ahead with direct talks. Much credit is due to Senator Mitchell. Were it not for his tireless efforts—and those of Secretary of State Clinton and the Obama Administration as a whole—it is unlikely peace efforts would have progressed this far.”

Special Envoy for Middle East Peace Senator George Mitchell said, “What we've tried to do is avoid a slavish adherence to the past while trying to learn what might have been improved in the past, what worked, what didn't work. And so we have avoided deliberately any specific label or identification that this is a continuation of process A or B or C. Additionally, please do not confuse personal engagement exclusively with public activities, because as you know, there's a lot that a president does that isn't in the public arena but that... represents very active participation (referring to President Obama's engagement). And President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu continue to agree that these negotiations, whose goal is to resolve all core issues (including right of return and a building freeze); can be completed in one year. Both leaders have reiterated their intent to approach these negotiations in good faith and with a serious purpose.”

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton remarked that, “I think that time is not on the side of either Israeli or Palestinian aspirations for security, peace and a state. Iranian-sponsored rejectionist ideology and a commitment to violence by those opposed to peace make reaching an agreement quickly all the more necessary. The United States wants to weigh in on the side of leaders and people who see this as maybe the last chance for a very long time to resolve this. On settlements, the United States believes the moratorium should be extended. At the same time, we recognize an agreement that could be forged between the Israelis and Palestinians on actions that could be taken by both sides that would enable the negotiations to continue, would be

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in the best interests of both sides. For me, this is a simple choice: no negotiations, no security, and no peace.”

Senator Joseph Lieberman made the following statement, “It is a positive and encouraging development, that after 19 months, the Israelis and Palestinians have at least agreed to start talking directly again. This is important precisely because we know from history that peace in the Middle East cannot be imposed from outside. Rather, it is only possible when there are leaders in the region who are prepared to make the decisions necessary to achieve it—beginning with the simple decision to sit down together. While Israeli and Palestinian leaders are resuming direct talks on the path to peace, the world must redouble our efforts against those in the region that are determined to thwart peace—foremost, the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its terrorist proxies. The extremist, expansionist regime in Iran threatens to exercise a nuclear veto someday to prevent Israelis and Palestinians from living side-by-side in peace and security. That is one of the many reasons why it is so imperative that the international community—an all those who hope and pray for peace—do everything in our power to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.”

Former Middle East Advisor to Republican and Democratic Secretaries of State, Aaron David Miller, said, “The region has, and dramatically, becoming nastier and more complex. U.S. priorities and interests, too, have changed. The notion that there’s a single fix to protecting those interests, let alone that Arab-Israeli peace would, like some magic bullet, make things better, is just flat wrong. In a broken, angry region with so many problems—from stagnant, inequitable economies to extractive and authoritarian governments that abuse human rights and deny the rule of law, to a popular culture mired in conspiracy and denial—it stretches the bounds of credibility to the breaking point to argue that settling Arab-Israeli conflict is the most critical issue, or that its resolution would somehow guarantee Middle East stability. There are enough people in the administration from the old days...who understand that this is a long movie and you don’t want to get yourself into a mission where you are the ones who are forced to save the process. Because it that is the point of departure we will fail. Without them owning it first there is no way they can do this...Once things look up, I think you will see a much more assertive Barack Obama.”

Senior Policy Advisor and Jewish Outreach Coordinator for President Obama, Dan Shapiro, said, “If negotiations look fruitful, the President has said that he looks forward to an op-

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portunity to visit the region. Opportunities to do that as these negotiations progress—if we see progress and the opportunity to add to that—could be very valuable and meaningful at the right time...”

Co-director of the New America Foundation’s Middle East Task Force, Daniel Levy, said that, “To get an Israeli ‘yes,’ we will have to perform a C-section to get it out. The only available surgeon is the American president, and it can only be executed if Israelis are faced with real choices and decisions to make. I believe personally that there is a capacity in the Israeli system to ultimately deliver a ‘yes’ to real de-occupation, either by Bibi, or a different coalition. But the combination of the strength of the settlers and their supporters, Israeli political dysfunctionality, and the lack of consequences for the status quo mean that this political ‘yes’ will not be delivered on its own.”

Co-director of the New America Foundation’s Middle East Task Force, Amjad Atallah, said, “There is no plan B. Obama is plan B. Abbas has no back door anymore. He is going to try and make this work because he has no alternative.”

Director of the Foreign Policy Program at the Brookings Institution, Martin Indyk, wrote, “Now that President Obama has finally succeeded in bringing the Israelis and the Palestinians back to the negotiating table, the commentariat is already dismissing his chances of reaching a peace agreement. But there are four factors that distinguish the direct talks from previous attempts, factors that offer some reasons for optimism. First, violence is down in the region. Second, settlement activity has slowed significantly and the demolition of Palestinian houses there is also down compared with recent years (but the settlement moratorium expires on September 26th and President Abbas has declared that he will withdraw from negotiations if settlement activity resumes.) Third, the public on both sides supports a two-state solution, as do a majority of Arabs. Fourth, there isn’t a lot left to negotiate. In the 17 years since the Oslo Accords were signed, detailed final status negotiations have dealt exhaustively with all the critical issues. If an independent Palestinian state is to be established, the zone of agreement is clear and the necessary trade-offs are already known.”

Vice President of Research at the Foundation for Defense and Democracies, Jonathan Schanzer, wrote, “Who does the Obama administration suggest rule this proposed state? If it’s Abbas and Fayyad, Obama will be advocating yet another illegitimate authoritarian Middle East regime. That’s certainly not

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pro-Palestinian policy. There's also the lingering matter of the Gaza Strip. If only the West Bank makes peace with Israel, Gaza's status remains unresolved. Would Hamas declare a second state? That too, would hardly benefit the Palestinians. Rather, it would deepen the geographic and political split that has set back the Palestinian cause since 2007. Moreover, an isolated Hamas would have little choice but continuing to remain on the Iranian dole. Thus, Gaza would become an official terrorist state, disavowed by all its neighbors, leaving its people with fewer opportunities. At this point, the very goal of these renewed talks—peace—comes into question. What happens when Israel responds to Gaza's terrorist provocations after an agreement is signed with the West Bank? Are Gazans not Palestinians? Would the West Bank not feel solidarity with their Gazan brothers and seek renewed confrontation with Israel? Obama has yet to answer these questions. With no apparent political endgame, his peace talks may do more harm than good for the Palestinian cause."

Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Michele Dunne said, "In effect you have both sides just doing this to please the United States. Neither side believes that a negotiated solution will result from the talks, nor are they prepared to make major concessions. While some have applauded President Obama for bringing the issue back to the front burner, the potential for success is low. The Palestinian leadership is weakened by a rift between Fatah and Hamas, and Palestinian Authority President Abbas has no other options but to accept what Obama is presenting. There's a strong feeling on the Palestinian side that the Palestinians are forced into this. They are just going along with this to preserve relations with the United States."

Senior Fellow for Middle East and Africa studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, Robert Danin, said that, "The international quartet—the European Union, Russia, the United Nations, and the U.S.—feel more urgency to tackle the issue that the Israelis and Palestinians. Moreover, the two sides are singing from different song sheets. Abbas will enter talks based on the quartet statement calling for "a settlement that ends the occupation which began in 1967 and results in the emergence of an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian state. Trust is absent from Israeli-Palestinian relations, as the Second Intifada of 2001–2003 killed not only thousands of Israelis and Palestinians, but also demolished the sense for most that peace is even possible. That popular skepticism severely constrains the negotiators' abilities to make concessions."

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Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, David Pollock, said that, "While the Obama administration views the settlements as an obstacle to the peace process, negotiations do not hinge solely on that issue (moratorium on settlements), and talks could continue if the moratorium ends quietly and without a great deal of publicity. I don't take the deadline (one-year timeline for the negotiations proposed by Secretary Clinton) very seriously. If the negotiations are making progress, then they'll continue, regardless of the deadline, because any plans to come to a solution within a year would be unrealistic."

U.S. News and World Reports' Mortimer Zuckerman wrote, "The Americans will sit in on the direct negotiations, something the Arab leaders wanted in the belief that the Obama administration is the most pro-Palestinian in history. The Israelis accepted only reluctantly. In all previous meetings, the Americans entered the talks in a serious way only at the endgame. The argument for the trilateral arrangement is that in any impasse the Americans will be on hand to offer a bridging proposal. The trouble is that this approach will make it harder for the Israelis and the Palestinians to engage. The risk is that they will take positions designed to elicit American approval. Or they'll be tempted to make harder demands of the other side in the knowledge that the Americans will be obliged to try to get movement on them."

The New York Times' Ethan Bronner asks, "Will the Israeli leader who built a career opposing a Palestinian state be the one to help bring it into being? In some fashion, that is Mr. Netanyahu's own claim -- that only someone like himself, with hawkish credentials, can and will produce lasting peace because only such a leader can bring his people with him. ... But it may also be, as critics on the left maintain, that Mr. Netanyahu is focused assiduously on projecting an image of peacemaker in order to keep the Obama administration on his side for the issue he cares about most -- combating Iran."

The Washington Times' Eli Lake reports, "The chairman of Israel's largest settler organization in the disputed territory of the West Bank on Wednesday predicted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government will collapse if he renews a moratorium on construction inside the settlements as part of the first direct Arab-Israeli peace talks since 2008." However, "Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has threatened to leave Thursday's direct negotiations if Mr. Netanyahu does not renew the West Bank building freeze set to expire Sept. 26."

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The New York Times' Helene Cooper and Mark Landler

write, "While the issues are daunting, some analysts also saw a reed of hope in the resolute response of Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Abbas to the killing by Hamas gunmen of four Israeli settlers in the West Bank on the eve of the talks. Both men immediately said the attack should not be allowed to derail the negotiations, and the Palestinian Authority condemned the killings. 'Normally, it's been reliably easy to torpedo, or veto, any progress between Israelis and Palestinians,' said Ziad J. Asali, the president of the American Task Force on Palestine. 'This means an incredible loss of a weapon.'"

The Daily Beast's Reza Aslan sighs, "It is difficult to find anyone who has much good to say about President Obama's handling of the Israeli-Palestinian crisis so far. The pro-Israel camp faults him for focusing too narrowly on the settlements issue. The pro-Palestine camp criticizes him for backing down on his pledge to be tough with Netanyahu. Neither side has confidence in his ability to broker a deal at all, let alone in a year. ... I recognize that those of us in the media who want peace for Israel and dignity for Palestine are supposed to gush enthusiasm and feign optimism every time a U.S. president gathers the Israeli and Palestinian leaders together in the same room. The situation in the region has become so desperate that we have no choice but to put away our skepticism and confidently declare that 'this time things are different... this time there's hope'. ... But it's hard to be optimistic when we have been using the same playbook for decades and have not come one inch closer to a peaceful resolution to the conflict."