

NEWS ANALYSIS

# In Mideast Talks, Scant Hopes From the Beginning

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JERUSALEM — The American invitation on Friday to the Israelis and Palestinians to start direct peace talks in two weeks in Washington was immediately accepted by both governments. But just below the surface there was an almost audible shrug. There is little confidence — close to none — on either side that the Obama administration’s goal of reaching a comprehensive deal in one year can be met.

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Instead, there is a resigned fatalism in the air. Most analysts view the talks as pairing the unwilling with the unable — a strong right-wing Israeli coalition led by Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) with no desire to reach an agreement against a relatively moderate [Palestinian](#) leadership that is too weak and divided to do so.

“These direct negotiations are the option of the crippled and the helpless,” remarked Zakaria al-Qaq, vice president of [Al Quds University](#) and a Palestinian moderate, when asked his view of the development. “It is an act of self-deception that will lead nowhere.”

And Nahum Barnea, [Israel](#)’s pre-eminent political columnist, said in a phone interview: “Most Israelis have decided that nothing is going to come out of it, that it will have no bearing on their lives. So why should they care?”

That such a dismissive tone comes not from the known rejectionists — the Islamists of [Hamas](#) who rule in Gaza and the leadership of the Israeli settler community in the West Bank — but from mainstream thinkers is telling of the mood.

Some Israelis who have spent their professional lives on peace talks with the

Palestinians were upset by the fear that failed talks could prove worse than no talks. [Yossi Beilin](#), for example, who left politics in 2008 after years as a leftist member of Parliament and government minister, said Friday that the Obama administration was wrong to set a one-year goal without consequences.

“I think this is a huge mistake by the U.S. administration,” he said by telephone. “There is not a chance in the world that in a year — or two or three — peace can be achieved. The gap between the sides is too big. Netanyahu did not come to power to divide Jerusalem or find a solution to the Palestinian refugees.”

The Obama administration says that while talks may be risky, the current drift is even riskier, and the only possible way forward is to put the leaders of the two sides together with American help.

Yet on the Palestinian side, not even the leadership is enthusiastic. [Mahmoud Abbas](#), the Palestinian president, has spent the past year and a half resisting the entreaties of Mr. Netanyahu to sit down together without preconditions. Mr. Abbas said repeatedly that years of such direct talks had led to no deal, only to the slow but steady loss of the West Bank to Israeli settlements.

He was hoping that the Obama administration would impose a solution, which he imagined would push Israel to yield more land and authority to him than the Netanyahu government favored.

That is why the Palestinians wanted [only indirect talks brokered by the Americans](#). But Mr. Abbas failed to obtain what he sought, and the administration pushed him toward direct talks. He has agreed only from a position of weakness, he and others say.

“Abbas is naked before his whole community,” observed Mahdi Abdul Hadi, chairman of the [Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs](#), an independent research institute in East Jerusalem. “Everyone knows that this Israeli government is not going to deliver anything.”

Most Palestinians — and many on the Israeli left — argue that there are now too many Israeli settlements in the West Bank for a viable, contiguous Palestinian state to arise there. Settlement growth has continued despite a construction moratorium announced by Mr. Netanyahu.

Moreover, support for many of the settlements remains relatively strong in Israel. In other words, if this view holds, the Israelis have closed out any serious option of a two-state solution. So the talks are useless.

The Israeli perspective focuses on Palestinian failures that have led to the current deadlock. As most Israelis see it, twice in the past decade their governments made generous offers to the Palestinian leadership that were rejected or ignored, evidence that peaceful coexistence was not the other side's goal.

The first offer was in 2000 from then-Prime Minister [Ehud Barak](#) to [Yasir Arafat](#) at Camp David. Within two months, a Palestinian uprising broke out, leading to blood on the streets. The second was less than two years ago, when then-Prime Minister [Ehud Olmert](#) offered even more to Mr. Abbas. Nothing came of that either.

What happened in Gaza over the past five years has also created intense Israeli disillusionment. Israel withdrew its settlers and soldiers and the result was a victory for Hamas, which rejects Israel's existence, and thousands of rockets shot at Israeli communities from Gaza. The gap of mutual antagonism between Hamas and the [Fatah](#)-dominated [Palestinian Authority](#) grows monthly.

As a result, although most polls still show Israelis [favoring a two-state solution](#), there is skepticism, even widespread cynicism, about Palestinian intentions and any prospect for a successful, peace-oriented state of Palestine.

The big issues that the sides will face in the talks are the same ones that have divided them for years — the future of Israeli settlements in areas conquered in the 1967 war, the borders between Israel and a future Palestinian state, the fate of Palestinian refugees from the 1948 creation of Israel and the status of Jerusalem.

Despite the intractable nature of those problems thus far, there are those who believe in the coming talks. Dore Gold, a former diplomat who has left public service but is closely associated with Mr. Netanyahu, said the negotiations “can be important as long as Israel's red lines are not crossed. Creative ideas need to emerge that will address the fundamental needs of both sides.”

The lines he considers red are the need to keep Jerusalem united and under

Israeli sovereignty and preserving Israeli control of the area in the West Bank along the Jordan border to prevent any flow of weapons in. Both positions have been completely rejected by Palestinians thus far.

Haim Assa, who served as a close political consultant to Prime Minister [Yitzhak Rabin](#) in the 1990s and continues to advise centrist Israeli leaders, said that even though the talks were between the Israelis and Palestinians, the power of success was with the Americans.

“The main player is the United States,” he said. “All the cards are in its hands. When the U.S. leaves Iraq it will want to put together a coalition of Israel, Jordan, Egypt and the Palestinians. These talks are central to that happening. If they push and take it seriously, they can do it.”

*Isabel Kershner contributed reporting from Jerusalem, and Khaled Abu-Akr from Ramallah, West Bank.*

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/21/world/middleeast/21assess.html?th&emc=th>