

Jaw Jaw Is Better than War War

By

P. Edward Haley

It is impossible to know whether the next round of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations will lead to peace.

There are huge obstacles.

Among them are domestic politics in Israel, which returned a government based on the country's conservative nationalist and religious parties. Compromise with the Palestinians is anathema to many within the government and their supporters.

The Palestinians are so deeply divided that they govern different geographic areas and are as opposed to one another as they are to Israel. The constant temptation to out bid one's rivals undermines trust among Palestinians and between them and Israel.

For many in the United States, the natural response is to point to past failures and warn against future concessions. Now that Israel is relatively safe, they say, critics want to force it to take steps that could turn the relatively quiet West Bank into another Gaza or Lebanon.

This is the usual way of counting risks in the Israeli Palestinian conflict, but it overlooks the advantages of talking instead of fighting. They are significant, so significant that they outweighed the reservations of the two sides and persuaded them to accept the Obama administration's invitation to talk.

The first and greatest advantage of peace talks is to slow the killing. Those who argue that Israel's assaults have stopped Palestinian attacks forget the balance sheet of the past decade. A conservative estimate is that since 2000 more than 500 Israelis have

died as a result of Palestinian attacks, and more than 6,000 Palestinians have been killed by Israel.

Second, negotiations create an opportunity for peaceful economic and political development. During the mid-1990s, the Oslo peace process encouraged the launching of bilateral economic initiatives such as Israeli and Palestinian joint investments, most of which were destroyed by the second intifada and the wars in Gaza and the West Bank.

Third, as the new talks proceed a precious web of civil society will begin to thicken and spread between Arab and Jew, knitting together dentists, or teachers, water experts, or farmers, who join one another for mutual advantage regardless of nationality. These kinds of spontaneous associations were enormously helpful in bringing peace to Northern Ireland, but they falter in the face of violence and war.

Last, peace talks put the emphasis on refraining from attack and reprisal. In this way, negotiations dilute the fear and uncertainty that favor radical movements, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, which were born out of strife and have grown stronger with it.

Peace talks and the atmosphere of restraint they foster serve other, less obvious goals. Privately officials of the Palestinian Authority say that they will be unable to overcome the challenges posed by Hamas unless ways can be found to improve the lives of Palestinians on the West Bank which has yet to return to the levels of 2000. The Palestinian Authority currently runs a budget deficit of 50%, and unemployment stands at about 20%. It is able to operate only thanks to international assistance, much of it from the United States and Europe.

For Israel the most immediate gain from the opening of talks has been to reduce its international isolation. Israelis on all sides of the political spectrum understandably resent what they see as an international double standard biased against them, but relations with other governments, especially with previously friendly governments such as Turkey, have been damaged by Israel's heavy-handed unilateralism.

There is another and ultimately more worrisome concern for Israel that the resumption of peace talks touches in ways that no other measures can. Decades of violence have produced deep splits among young Israelis and led more and more of them toward views that conflict with democratic values. A recent poll reported in Haaretz found that 48% of young Israelis would refuse direct orders to evacuate settlements in the West Bank while nearly one third of the respondents would refuse to serve in the West Bank. Opinion among young non-Orthodox American Jews, according to studies by Frank Luntz, Steven Cohen of Hebrew Union College and Ari Kelman of the University of California at Davis, shows less division and more of a growing indifference to Israel together with a deep longing for peace. These are quiet long-term consequences of the years of violence and confrontation, but they are signals that Israel's leaders cannot ignore.

For the Obama administration the opening of talks not only marks the culmination of two years of hard work that have been politically costly at home, but offers a chance to shift the dynamics of the region away from war and terrorism, reducing the atmosphere of crisis that favors radicals in the region. If the talks succeed, the process could be broadened to include Lebanon and Syria, Iraq, and even Iran. The talks need not solve every problem immediately in order to improve the wellbeing of Israelis and Palestinians, but if the parties fail to move convincingly toward peace the benefits of jaw jaw will be lost to war war.

The author is W.M. Keck Foundation Professor of International Strategic Studies at Claremont McKenna College. He is a co-author of *Strategic Foreign Assistance: Civil Society in International Security*.