

Will Netanyahu Change Coalition?

Experts divided on prospects of talks, but some suggest prime minister may be willing to bring in Kadima.

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If the Palestinians are serious about a peace agreement with Israel, many analysts believe Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has the desire and ability to deliver it — even if it means having to change his coalition.

“If [Mahmoud] Abbas decides to move forward and do what is doable, he will have a partner in Netanyahu,” said Jonathan Rynhold, a senior lecturer at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.

But he was quick to add that he does “not believe the Palestinian leaders are interested in serious negotiations. It seems they are being dragged along [by the United States]. ... Abbas always looks good on paper, but whenever there are decisions to be made, he is never willing to make a stand.”

Eytan Gilboa, a professor of political science and communication at Bar-Ilan University, agreed with that assessment, saying: “What I heard from the people around Netanyahu is that he is serious and willing to make concessions, but I don’t believe the other side is serious. ... Abbas is very weak and even backed off from an excellent agreement offered to him by [former Prime Minister Ehud] Olmert. He is under a threat from Hamas and cannot meet the minimum Israeli demands for an end of the conflict.”

But should word of progress in the talks leak out, Rynhold said he fears it would be derailed by Hamas “firing a few missiles into big Israeli cities and Abbas calling off the talks after Israel responded” with an attack of its own on targets in Gaza.

“The more they make progress and are closer to an agreement, the greater the motivation of Hamas and Iran to undermine it,” he said. “Everybody wants peace, but before you can go into this process, one has to provide convincing answers to how you neutralize all kinds of threats and I’m receiving unconvincing answers.”

Gilboa faults the U.S for not having properly prepared for the talks slated to begin next Thursday in Washington.

“Too many questions have been left up in the air because the goal was to get the sides talking,” he said. “The U.S. believes that once the process begins it will take a life of its own, but in this case [the U.S.] is out of touch with reality. ... And the timetable of one year from now for a complete resolution of all the issues is an American timetable, not a Middle Eastern one.”



Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu said his focus is on security before engaging in peace talks.

Netanyahu was quoted Monday as saying he wanted to concentrate first on security issues and that once he could “ensure that no missiles will fall on Tel Aviv, it will be possible to move quickly toward a comprehensive arrangement.”

But David Makovsky, the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said he just returned from five weeks of talks in the Middle East with both Israelis and Palestinians and is convinced “there is a basis to believe a breakthrough is possible on the issues of Israeli security concerns and the borders of a Palestinian state.”

A comprehensive agreement would be more elusive, however, because neither side has prepared their people for the compromises necessary to resolve the issues of the future of Jerusalem and Palestinian refugees, he said.

Nevertheless, Makovsky said he detected “quiet signs that the leaders understand what it is going to take” to achieve a comprehensive peace deal. That includes Palestinian recognition that the large Israeli settlement blocs in the West Bank will remain in Israeli hands in exchange for “offsetting [Israeli] land.”

Although he said he would expect to see a battle over the future of Ariel, a West Bank settlement of 20,000 people, “the point is that the Palestinians know the Israelis will keep some settlements.”

Gerald Steinberg, a professor of political science at Bar-Ilan University, said he too believes Netanyahu has the ability to reach an accord with the Palestinians “because he knows the majority of Israelis want to find a way out of the status quo of the 1967 war and the occupation.”

He said that just as former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon received Israeli support for the withdrawal from Gaza, Netanyahu could expect support if the right package was presented. He noted that not since the end of the Clinton administration have American bridging proposals been presented.

“If [President Barack] Obama tries to impose a settlement that would not violate Israeli red lines,” he might succeed in winning Israeli support, Steinberg said.

Any agreement with the Palestinians, however, would have to be an interim accord because Hamas still controls Gaza and the borders of a Palestinian state would have to include Gaza, he added.

A political source in Jerusalem who asked to remain anonymous said that without changing his coalition partners and enforcing party discipline in his Likud Party, Netanyahu could not achieve the peace breakthrough he is looking for.

“He can proceed, but not with the current coalition,” said the source. “If he means business, a change is unavoidable. And it would have to come in the very early stages of the talks because he does not have enough backing in the current coalition and he needs space to maneuver to reach an agreement with Abbas.”

Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, a professor of international relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, said he would expect such a coalition change might involve replacing Yisrael Beiteinu and other right-wing parties and bringing in the 28-seat Kadima Party. But he said he is not convinced that Israel or the Palestinians are prepared to make the concessions necessary for an agreement.

“Olmert went so far compared to even [former Prime Minister Ehud] Barak, and Abbas could not accept what was offered,” he said. “Olmert accepted dividing Jerusalem and establishing some kind of international regime for the holy sites in Jerusalem and Abbas could not accept that. And Olmert accepted getting 5,000 Palestinian refugees on the basis of a humanitarian unification of families. I don’t see Netanyahu going farther than Olmert, so I don’t see much hope for this negotiation.”

The only way there might be a breakthrough, Bar-Siman-Tov said, is if Obama “pressures both sides — and I’m not sure if either side has the domestic power to make far-reaching concessions.”

As a result, he said Israel and the Palestinians may have to “look for a fallback position” and opt for an interim or partial settlement.

“They could agree to a Palestinian state with provisional borders, leaving aside the questions of Jerusalem and the refugees,” Bar-Siman-Tov said.

Because of Palestinian refusal in the past to agree to an interim agreement on borders for fear they would become permanent, he said the U.S. and the other members of the Quartet (Russia, the European Union and the United Nations) would need to provide “guarantees” that permanent borders were still to be negotiated.

Bar-Siman-Tov pointed out that such a concession might be more palatable if the Palestinians were reminded that the so-called road map to peace, which was proposed by President George W. Bush and endorsed by both Israel and the Palestinian Authority, calls for the establishment of a Palestinian state with provisional borders.

Once there is a Palestinian state in the West Bank, he added, future negotiations would be conducted state-to-state but there would still be a need for mediators to resolve the outstanding issues that for years have defied attempts at settlement.

“The formula [for a settlement] is there, they just have to find the incentives to sell it to the sides,” Bar-Siman-Tov said.