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The (Very) Quiet Peace Talks Between Israel and Hamas

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The recent news out of the Middle East has been grim. But, if there's an atmosphere of pessimism in the international press, that's because the real story hasn't been earning any attention—intentionally so. We can all read about Hamas's daily maligning of Israel, and its promises to put an end to Jewish sovereignty in the Holy Land, just as we can read about Israeli officials continuing to demand that Hamas recognize the *right* of Israel (including Jerusalem) to exist, knowing full well that no devout Muslim has ever done so, or can ever do so. The past month has also seen [hunger strikes](#) [2] by prominent Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, which have incited widespread demonstrations in Palestinian territories.

What hasn't earned much attention are the successive rounds of negotiations between Israeli army officers and other security officials and their Egyptian counterparts, mostly in Cairo, parallel to those that the Egyptians have been conducting with Hamas personnel. These “non-negotiations” between Israel and Hamas might be critical in finding a durable solution for their conflict.

But both sides prefer to keep the talks quiet. Hamas and Israel each appreciate the advantages of maintaining a diplomatic fiction while they pursue their real interests. Each side can thus publicly maintain its ideological purity, biding its time as it ascertains the intentions of the other. The ultimate effect may be to lay the groundwork for a pragmatic, and unprecedented, system of coexistence. This may not be the classic “peace process,” but it is may prove a fateful process, nonetheless.

Hamas and Israel are not the only regional powers practicing such “constructive opacity,” to

amend a term borrowed from Henry Kissinger. On the surface, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, which now runs the government in Cairo, has been diffident towards Israel: Egypt's political leadership has yet to meet with their Israeli counterparts. But the quiet service that Egypt is rendering in brokering between Hamas and Israel may prove to be more important for the cause of peace than anything that President Mubarak did in bygone days.

Saudi Arabia, too, has been canny in its use of ambiguity. Though Riyadh has been careful not to publicly wade into the minutia of Israeli or Palestinian politics, none other than the current Crown Prince felt compelled to remind a recent high-level meeting of Arab regional official that the peace deal once offered by King Abdullah is still very much alive. That deal would be a game-changer, leading to the recognition of Israel by over fifty Muslim states. Indeed, in many ways, the Saudis are the greatest pragmatists of the Middle East. (Osama bin Laden, who hated the leaders of his native country, was one of the first to recognize this.)

In a larger sense, the situation in the region does not bode as poorly for Israel as might seem at first glance. Iran is suffering more than ever under sanctions—and its achilles heel may yet prove to be its client state, Syria. It's clear than Bashar al Assad is in dire straits and there's little sign that the Iranian forces battling on the ground in Syria alongside Hezbollah units will ever stem the tide. Meanwhile, Jordan has been experiencing a relatively low-key Arab Spring, and the Saudi monarchy has been adept at managing the popular discontent in its own country.

As for Palestine, there is an ever-greater hope for some sort of reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah. Paradoxically, the U.N. vote that granted the Palestinian Authority enhanced status has only underscored how far from statehood the Fatah-led government actually is. The PA's security forces are fairly effective, but its entire edifice of civilian governance is in ruins. There's no legislative assembly, no elections for the presidency, no control over Gaza: If this were a state, it would most certainly be a failed one. It's now clear to all Palestinians that the precondition to a coherent politics in Palestine is for Fatah and Hamas to cooperate, no matter how much they may have fought in the past.

Thus, contrary to appearances, this is a very promising moment to forge durable agreements between Israel and Palestine. That's not to say that an “end of conflict” solution is in sight; neither side is capable of making the major concessions necessary for that. Instead, the outcome will likely be a medium-term plan to manage the thorny issues that divide the two sides—and that ought to suffice. Hamas and Israel both seem to recognize this. Indeed, it's worth noting that the pursuit of quiet negotiations appears to be the tacit consensus position across all Israeli political parties and throughout the Palestinian camp. Both sides know that this is a time for pragmatism, not ideology.

Fortunately, the United States recognizes this, too. It was a master stroke for Barack Obama to send outgoing Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Jerusalem and Cairo in December to endorse the talks that produced a ceasefire to the war in Gaza. It proved to the entire region that Washington remains the most capable broker when it comes to peace in the Middle East—and that it knows how to seize opportunities when they unexpectedly emerge. As Obama prepares to travel to the region, one can fairly hope that he recognizes the value of the cards in his possession. He may not have any aces up his sleeve, but kings and queens should suffice for the moment.

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