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## US gambles on new Middle East talks with no clear plan

Media Mention of ATFP in BBC News - August 24, 2010 - 11:00pm  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-11044951> [1]

Whenever a US administration makes a formal announcement about peace talks in the Middle East, hopes are usually raised - maybe, just maybe, they will actually succeed.

This time, scepticism is at an all-time high and expectations are low, including for the near term, let alone the ambitious goal set out by Hillary Clinton of resolving all key issues of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict within a year.

The statement by the secretary of state and her special envoy, George Mitchell, was high in aspirations, low on details.

When Mr Mitchell was asked what breakthrough in the indirect "proximity" talks made it possible to finally resume direct negotiations, he referred vaguely to cumulative efforts and the realisation of both parties that a two-state solution was needed.

In other words, there was no real progress in the proximity talks and the thorniest issues remain on the table, untouched.

Mid-terms

The discussions apparently did not produce much in terms of the format of the direct talks either.

Mr Mitchell said that the timing and location of the next round of negotiations would be discussed in Washington during the trilateral meetings in early September.

Ghaith al-Omari of the American Task Force in Palestine (ATFP) said he expected no breakthrough in the first few months.

"The greatest chunk of American energy is to be directed to ensure the negotiations don't collapse, and that neither side leaks, nor creates a nasty environment," he explained.

"The administration wants to shelve this in a way, to stabilise the situation until after the mid-terms."

The US mid-term elections for Congress in November will be a key event for the Democratic

Party, and President Barack Obama will want political quiet, including on the foreign policy front.

The direct talks will also help defuse tension when the Israeli government's moratorium on Jewish settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank comes to an end on 26 September.

A senior US official told the BBC that the timing of the early September talks was to have as much distance as possible from that looming, threatening deadline.

Sustainable momentum

So, starting direct talks between the Palestinians and the Israelis is a small step, with more form than substance. But it could become a significant one.

The Obama administration is hoping the September meeting could create a sense of urgency - because of the one-year deadline - but also create momentum.

"Getting into political negotiations is politically costly, but once you're in it, you can't just walk out. That's when withdrawing becomes politically costly," said Mr al-Omari, a former Palestinian negotiator, of the Palestinian and Israeli leaders.

But to create sustainable momentum, the Obama administration needs a plan, and unless US officials are keeping their cards close to their chest, it looks for now as though they are not sure how to take this forward.

"Left to their own devices, the Israeli and Palestinian leaders visiting Washington in September will not make progress," cautioned Daniel Levy, from the liberal New America Foundation, and a former Israeli negotiator.

"It was the Obama administration that insisted on the direct-talks format as the way forward, and the ball will now be in their court to produce results," he added.

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