



*Liberal Democrat Friends of Israel*

## **Israel and the Palestinians resume peace talks**

### **LDFI Update September 2010**

At the first direct talks in two years, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas met at a peace summit in Washington on 1 September 2010, hosted by President Obama.

The summit established a framework for continued talks which will cover all the core issues and aims for an agreement to be reached within a year. Regular meetings will take place between the two leaders and their respective negotiators. It has been reported that negotiations will begin with borders and security, followed by Jerusalem, water and settlements and the refugee issue.

At the summit, PM Netanyahu set out two areas that were important to him. Firstly, that any agreement must include mutual recognition of each other's right for national self determination with Palestine as a national home for the Palestinians and Israel as a national home for the Jews, "Mutual recognition is necessary in order to signal to both of our nations that the conflict is over." Secondly, the need for security. The agreement must deal with the threat of rockets and missiles entering the West Bank and the rise of Iran and its proxies in the region.

#### ***"Israel is completely committed to peace"***

At the Washington summit, PM Netanyahu repeated his dedication to reaching an agreement and to ending the conflict and at his first Cabinet meeting following the summit, Netanyahu said:

"Israel is completely committed to peace. I think that we have already proven that we are ready to go a long way in order to reach peace... but this time, for us to succeed, we must learn from the lessons of the past... and to think in an original way...I am willing to reach a compromise with our neighbours, while protecting our security interests."

Netanyahu told a delegation of US Congressman, it is "possible, through such direct and contiguous negotiations, held without breaks or delays, to achieve a peace agreement within a year."

#### **Four killed by Hamas and threat of more attacks to come**

Hamas has claimed responsibility for the murder of four Israelis and an attack on two more and has also threatened more violence to come. Although these attacks did not halt the talks, this violent rejection of the peace talks will remind the Israeli public of the risk to their security the talks and any concessions could bring. Hamas' refusal to renounce violence and recognise Israel will cast a shadow over the talks as will any future violent attacks.

## **The next hurdle**

The next major challenge for the peace talks will come on 26 September when Israel's moratorium on settlement building is due to expire. President Abbas has threatened to withdraw from the peace talks if the settlement freeze is not extended. From PM Netanyahu's point of view, settlements should be addressed as part of the comprehensive talks and not as a precondition. The Prime Minister faces strong opposition to extending the freeze from within the coalition and within his own Likud Party. Nevertheless, various options are being considered and it is likely that a compromise will be found.

## **Internal and political pressures**

Prime Minister Netanyahu will find it hard to convince several of his coalition partners and Members of his own Likud Party to support any major territorial concessions. An indication of future trouble ahead for the coalition came with Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman telling a meeting of his Israel Beitenu Party that he could foresee only an interim agreement, not a peace deal within this generation. The opposition Kadima Party may be ready to step in if they believe Netanyahu is serious about peace talks leading to a realignment of the current Israeli coalition.

President Abbas has come under pressure from within the Palestinian Authority for agreeing to talks without preconditions. This may explain his threats to withdraw from the talks if the settlement freeze is not extended and reported comments to East Jerusalem-based Al-Quds al-Araby newspaper that if forced to give in on the issues of refugees or borders, he would "pack my bags and leave".

However, within the Palestinian Authority, there are no immediate political threats to Abbas. No elections are scheduled, he has maintained quiet in the West Bank and the West Bank economy is growing. The one year proposed time for the negotiations will help reassure Abbas and his critics that the peace talks will not drag on without progress and there have been reports of a more positive attitude to the talks from the Palestinian Delegation and also from Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa.

## **Conclusion**

It is early days for the peace talks with a significant hurdle coming only weeks in. We can expect some kind of compromise reached on the settlement freeze however difficult negotiations are ahead over core issues such as borders and Jerusalem. The stakes will be raised with the threat of repeated violent attacks by Hamas who will also make it difficult for President Abbas to implement any agreements reached.

However, Israel and the Palestinians have come close to reaching agreement before. Many believe that the demarcation of the final borders is virtually known, with Israel retaining major settlements and compensating the Palestinians with other areas of land. There is also a view that it is only the right wing in Israel that can make peace. The prime example is the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt signed by former Likud Prime Minister Menachem Begin in 1978.

For the moment, we will have to wait and see what the ongoing negotiations will bring.