

MEMMO

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Proximity Talks Mark Positive Step, but Direct Negotiations Essential for Peace

Israeli-Palestinian proximity talks mediated by the United States are a welcome first step back to the negotiating table. America and Israel understand that to reach a genuine and lasting peace these indirect talks should lead rapidly and unconditionally to direct, bilateral negotiations. Unfortunately, Palestinian leaders continue to insist on unrealistic preconditions, while Israel has taken a series of steps to foster serious and direct negotiations.

Though proximity talks are a welcome first step, direct, bilateral negotiations are the only proven way to reach a secure and lasting peace.

- Israeli and Palestinian leaders have engaged in direct, face-to-face negotiations for nearly two decades. The Palestinian refusal during the past year to engage directly with Israel is a step back that will only delay the prospects for peace and Palestinian statehood.
- Direct talks—with both sides sitting at the same table—have been critical to peace deals between Israel and Egypt and Israel and Jordan.
- Proximity talks—in which the United States will shuttle between the parties—represent a positive development if they lead quickly to the resumption of direct negotiations.
- Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has stressed the importance of direct negotiations, saying she hoped proximity talks “will set the stage for a resumption of direct negotiations on all permanent status issues as soon as possible.”
- The Arab states and the Palestinian Authority (PA) should drop their preconditions for the resumption of direct negotiations. Arab demands that Israel commit to withdraw to the 1949 Armistice lines or freeze all Jewish housing construction in Israel’s capital are unrealistic, harmful conditions that would prejudice the final outcome of negotiations.
- In the past, former PA President Yasir Arafat and even current PA President Mahmoud Abbas negotiated important understandings with Israel without such preconditions.



U.S. envoy George Mitchell and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The allies have called for direct peace talks between Israel and Palestinians.

An imposed solution to the conflict—which precludes a buy-in from the parties—is sure to fail.

- The United States, as both a trusted friend of Israel and a mediator, can and should play a helpful role in bringing the parties together. Ultimately, though, the conflict must be resolved between the parties themselves through direct negotiations.

- President Obama made clear that an imposed solution will not work. “In order for any agreement to endure, peace cannot be imposed from the outside; it must be negotiated directly by the leaders who are required to make the hard choices and compromises that take on history,” the president wrote in an April 20 letter to Alan Solow, chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.
- Abbas, however, continues to call for an American imposition of a peace plan. On April 24, in a statement to his Fatah party, Abbas said, “Since you, Mr. President [Obama] and you, the members of the American administration, believe in this, it is your duty to call for the steps in order to reach the solution and impose the solution—impose it.”

Unlike the PA, for the past year Israel has sought direct negotiations and has taken real steps on the ground to promote the prospects for peace.

- While Israel hopes to resume direct negotiations, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu welcomed the Arab League’s recent endorsement of indirect, U.S.-brokered proximity talks, saying he is willing to resume talks “at any time and at any place.”
- Netanyahu also has stressed the importance of direct talks between the two sides, saying “one cannot assume that that we will reach decisions and agreements on critical issues such as security and our national interests and their interests if we don’t sit in the same room.”
- Beyond calling for direct talks, Israel has taken concrete steps on the ground to promote peace with the Palestinians:
 - For the first time in his political career, Netanyahu announced last June that he supports a two-state solution to the conflict: a demilitarized Palestinian state alongside the Jewish state of Israel.
 - Netanyahu announced last November a 10-month moratorium on the construction of new homes in the West Bank, calling it a “far-reaching and painful step.” No Israeli prime minister from either side of the political spectrum had ever agreed to such a settlement freeze.
 - Since April 2008, Israel has removed more than 350 roadblocks and checkpoints in the West Bank—210 in the last two months alone—in order to facilitate freedom of movement for hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and increase economic activity.
 - Amid these Israeli steps, the West Bank’s GDP grew last year by more than nine percent and the stock market’s Al-Quds Index increased by nearly 12 percent.
 - Israel is working closely with the United States, Jordan and the PA to enhance the capabilities and effectiveness of the PA security forces in the West Bank. Five battalions of security forces have undergone training in Jordan and 52 police stations are now operating in the West Bank’s towns and villages.