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Op-Ed

## THE CHALLENGE FOR ARAFAT AND BARAK

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The date on which President Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority vowed to declare an independent Palestinian state unilaterally, if the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations fail to produce an agreement, is rapidly approaching. It seems unlikely that an agreement can be reached by that date. On the other hand, there are growing indications that Arafat, heeding the advice of world leaders whom he has consulted, may decide to postpone his declaration of independence.

Such restraint on Arafat's part would be a valuable contribution to the peace process. The negotiations have made significant progress, and a mutually satisfactory agreement remains a possibility. But, for understandable reasons, the final steps are difficult. Both sides are faced with emotionally painful and politically risky choices, which require creative negotiations that cannot be constrained by arbitrary deadlines. A unilateral declaration of Palestinian independence could easily set into motion an escalatory process of action and reaction, provocation and counterprovocation that might stall meaningful negotiations for a long time to come.

Letting Sept. 13 pass by, however, as merely a day on which nothing happened would not serve the process as well as it could. In particular, it would undermine the standing of both Arafat and Ehud **Barak**, the Israeli prime minister, with their political constituencies.

**Barak** urgently needs a peace agreement by the time the Israeli Knesset reconvenes late in October if he is to prevent the collapse of his government.

Arafat would leave himself open to the charge that he capitulated under Israeli and American pressure and went back on his repeated vows to declare an independent state on Sept. 13. The capacity of both leaders to negotiate a mutually satisfactory agreement and persuade the public of the historic value of such an agreement would be strengthened by transforming Sept. 13 into a day on which substantial progress toward Israeli-Palestinian peace was recorded.

Three steps in that direction would be worth considering. First, the two leaders could express a joint commitment to refraining from unilateral steps that preempt the negotiations and threaten to undermine the process. In this spirit, Arafat would announce his decision to postpone the declaration of an independent Palestinian state in anticipation of a negotiated agreement calling for the establishment of such a state.

**Barak**, in turn, would commit himself to a complete hold of all settlement activities in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, including not only the construction of new settlements or neighborhoods, but also the expansion of existing ones.

Second, the two leaders could present a shared vision of the end point of the negotiations, while acknowledging that the vision is contingent on successfully completing the negotiation of details, which is still in progress. The leaders would agree that the negotiations are aimed toward a two-state solution, conducive to stable peace, mutually enhancing cooperation, and ultimate reconciliation between the former enemies.

In this spirit, **Barak** would make it clear that successful completion of the negotiations would mean Israel's commitment to a Palestinian state possessing the properties of sovereignty, security, and viability that are essential to a genuinely independent state. Arafat, in turn, would make it clear that successful completion of the negotiations would spell the end of the conflict, including an end to Palestinian challenges of the legitimacy and integrity of Israel.

Third, the peace process would be greatly enhanced if the two leaders could use the occasion of the deadline to begin acknowledging responsibility for the past and for the future. In doing so, each leader would be reminding his own public and reassuring the public on the other side that the negotiations are designed to achieve a historic compromise, not just the best deal that the two sides can extract from each other in light of their respective power positions.

Both sides would have to accept responsibility for past actions, although the greatest challenge would confront **Barak** in acknowledging Israel's role in the plight of refugees and the excesses of the occupation. And both sides would have to accept responsibility for forging a new relationship for the future, although the greatest challenge here would confront Arafat in acknowledging Israel's national legitimacy and permanent presence. The last step is likely to be particularly problematic for the two leaders, although none will be easy. All three steps do have the advantage of being reciprocal. Moreover, they are contingent on the parties' success in negotiating an agreement and they leave open the details of the agreement.

If both leaders could use the Sept. 13 date as a vehicle for the positive gestures proposed here, they would increase the likelihood of a final agreement that would form the basis of lasting peace and reconciliation.

• END •