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Trends. Ehud Barak and Peace: Mistakes on the 15-Month Mistake

Editor

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Many analysts, journalists, and diplomats--the last often speaking on an unattributed basis--have been citing a huge error in the current quest for peace between Israel and the Palestinian National Authority and between Israel and Syria and Lebanon. (Some rather view the peace quest as among the four entities given their de facto independence, even if Lebanon largely functions as a dependent surrogate or vassal of Syria.) The huge error supposedly is Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's declaration that important agreements on the peace quest must be finalized, or be close to finalization, within 15 months.

There are at least two significant rationales for viewing the declaration as error. First, a deadline allows negotiating powers to not even attempt serious negotiation until the deadline is drawing nigh. Second, the deadline becomes a tripwire of failure for its declarer--leading to pressures to accept positions not in the interest of security but of not failing to reach an agreement.

In opposition to opponents of deadline, one might well posit that a deadline impedes a negotiating power from merely stringing others along and marking time. A deadline--through the setting down of a marker--also can demonstrate the resolve and good faith of the deadline's creator and facilitate negotiation.

In fact, a history of peace negotiations among various nation-states and political entities surely suggests that deadlines may or may not contribute to successful resolution of issues. As with decisions on clarity and ambiguity on how specific issues are even conceptualized and phrased, a general stance on always favoring or opposing deadlines becomes yet another set of ideological blinders with which negotiating participants are already burdened and from which they must try to break free.

The correct stance on the 15-month deadline is to recognize the threats and opportunities it entails and then to proceed towards the peace of the brave. (See Druckman, D. (1997). Dimensions of international negotiations: Structures, processes, and outcomes. *Group Decision and Negotiation*, 6, 395-420; National security policy and toleration for ambiguity: Israel, Northern Ireland, North Korea, and the World. (September 4, 1998). *IBPP*, 5(10); Ghosh, D. (1996). Nonstrategic delay in bargaining: An experimental investigation. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 67, 312-325; Ochs, E., & Jacoby, S. (1997). Down to the wire: The cultural clock of physicists and the discourse of consensus. *Language in Society*, 26, 479-505; The deployment of ground forces to Kosovo: A paean for ambiguity. (February 5, 1999). *IBPP*, 6(5); Safire, W. (July 22, 1999). The cherubic commando. *The New York Times*, p. A21.) (Keywords: Israel, Lebanon, Middle East, Palestine, Peace Negotiations, Security, Syria.)