Israeli-Palestinian Talks

One gets the impression that under renewed pressure from Washington, the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations on a "peaceful settlement", which had barely begun, are already deadlocked. There remains an enormous distance between the positions of the two parties. This is confirmed, in particular, by the results of a public opinion survey, commissioned by the Tel Aviv newspaper Maariv and conducted by the Israeli institute of sociology Maagar mohot. You can say that the main idea behind the "land for peace" negotiations is failing. The predominant section of Israeli society is increasingly drifting to the right and does not want to hear about peace and the establishment of a Palestinian state. The fact that, according to the survey, many Israelis have never heard of the Oslo peace accords says much about the political culture of many Israelis. Twenty-seven percent of those surveyed did not know what agreements had been concluded 20 years ago.

Some of the most important agreements should be noted. Their main point was that it was agreed that the Israeli forces would be withdrawn from parts of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and a temporary Palestinian self-governing administration would be created in the areas liberated from Israeli forces. This administration was supposed to exist for five years, during which it was planned to begin negotiations on a final settlement of the conflict. Israel had pledged to provide temporary self governance to the Palestinians gradually in several phases. Along with these principles, the two delegations signed the Letters of Mutual Recognition - the Israeli government recognized the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and the PLO recognized Israel's right again to exist and renounced terrorism and other forms of violence (the first time such statements were made by the PLO was in 1988). The aim of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations was the establishment of an interim Palestinian self-governing administration, which would have been represented by a council selected by the West Bank and Gaza's Palestinian population. This administration was to exist no more than five years and end with the final settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict on the basis of UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338, which were an integral part of the whole peace process. The negotiations on a final settlement should have begun as early as possible and addressed the problems of Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees, Jewish settlements, security, borders, relations and cooperation with neighboring countries and other issues of mutual interest. The five-year transition period was to start from the moment of the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Gaza Strip and Jericho area. In order to provide the Palestinian people with self-governance conforming with democratic principles, the agreement provided for free general elections to the interim administration council. The jurisdiction of this council was to cover the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, except for issues that were left to be covered by negotiations on a final settlement. Both parties agreed to view the West Bank and Gaza Strip as a single territorial unit. The agreement provided for the transfer of control in the fields of education, culture, health, social security, taxation and tourism from the IDF to the Palestinian Authority. The Palestinian Council was to form an effective police force, while Israel was to retain responsibility for external defense. The establishment of the Israeli-Palestinian Cooperation Commission was provided for, the purpose of which was the development and implementation of joint programs identified in the protocols included in the agreement. Israeli troops in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were to be relocated and removed from densely populated areas. The Declaration of Principles was expected to enter into force one month after its signing. Additional protocols and agreements signed together with the declaration were to be considered part of it.

For many Israelis, the Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO have already become ancient history, and this
history is almost forgotten. Forty percent of respondents (among those who knew of the agreements) stated that they were against their signing at the time. And 57 percent of respondents said that, in their opinion, the Oslo Accords have caused damage to Israel from a political, military and economic point of view.

However, in political terms, what is much more important is the fact that 53 percent of Israelis polled said they would not support an agreement with the Palestinians now if it included the Israeli withdrawal from the west bank of the River Jordan (from Judea and Samaria, using the Israeli terminology), even if the Palestinians agreed to recognize Israel as a Jewish state and waived their demand for refugees' right of return. Given the fact that the current Israeli leadership has already announced its intention to put to a national referendum the planned agreement with the Palestinians (if and when it will be achieved), and the Palestinian leadership does not show the slightest willingness to recognize Israel as a Jewish state and give up the right of return for Palestinian refugees, it seems there is very little real chance of achieving an Israeli-Palestinian accord. The fact that over the past two decades, the number of Jewish settlers in the occupied West Bank has been rapidly growing should be taken into consideration. And this has taken place under the apparent overt and covert policies of the Israeli government. To date, the proportion of the Israeli general population on the West Bank has already exceeded 20 percent and continues to grow, and in some areas the Israelis predominate numerically.

This change in demographic situation in conjunction with the disappointment of the majority of Israelis with the results of the "peace process" must certainly affect their attitude towards the hypothetical territorial concessions. An additional factor was the apparent deterioration of the situation on the Israeli borders with the Arab States (primarily in Syria and Egypt), calling into question the relevance and significance of any peace agreements with Israel's neighbors in the foreseeable future.

One other point cannot be ignored. It seems that the government of Benjamin Netanyahu deliberately subjected itself to extremely harsh criticism from much of the Israeli population, with its decision to release as a "gesture of goodwill" over a hundred Palestinian terrorists detained in Israeli prisons. With this step, it at least temporarily diverted the Americans' attention from Israeli construction in the settlements and in the Jewish neighborhoods of East Jerusalem.

However, we can assume that soon enough the next round of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations will finally come to a dead-end, and the United States will require new Israeli "gestures of good will" (primarily a construction freeze in the settlements of the west bank of the River Jordan and East Jerusalem), which, given the current mood of the Israeli society, the government of Benjamin Netanyahu is unlikely to agree to. All of the above facts and considerations allow us to come to a firm forecast, that the negotiations will reach an impasse and this will be further evidence of the failure of U.S. policy in the Middle East.

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