By George Friedman

The Israeli government and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) have agreed to engage in direct peace talks Sept. 2 in Washington. Neither side has expressed any enthusiasm about the talks. In part, this comes from the fact that entering any negotiations with enthusiasm weakens your bargaining position. But the deeper reason is simply that there have been so many peace talks between the two sides and so many failures that it is difficult for a rational person to see much hope in them. Moreover, the failures have not occurred for trivial reasons. They have occurred because of profound divergences in the interests and outlooks of each side.

These particular talks are further flawed because of their origin. Neither side was eager for the talks. They are taking place because the United States wanted them. Indeed, in a certain sense, both sides are talking because they do not want to alienate the United States and because it is easier to talk and fail than it is to refuse to talk.

The United States has wanted Israeli-Palestinian talks since the Palestinians organized themselves into a distinct national movement in the 1970s. Particularly after the successful negotiations between Egypt and Israel and Israel's implicit long-term understanding with Jordan, an agreement between the Palestinians and the Israelis appeared to be next on the agenda. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the collapse of its support for Fatah and other Palestinian groups, a peace process seemed logical and reasonable.

Over time, peace talks became an end in themselves for the United States. The United States has interests throughout the Islamic world. While U.S.-Israeli relations are not the sole point of friction between the Islamic world and the United States, they are certainly one point of friction, particularly on the level of public diplomacy. Indeed, though most Muslim governments may not regard Israel as critical to their national interests, their publics do regard it that way for ideological and religious reasons.

Many Muslim governments therefore engage in a two-level diplomacy: first, publicly condemning Israel and granting public support for the Palestinians as if it were a major issue and, second, quietly ignoring the issue and focusing on other matters of greater direct interest, which often actually involves collaborating with the Israelis. This accounts for the massive difference between the public stance of many governments and their private actions, which can range from indifference to hostility toward Palestinian interests. Countries like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are all prepared to cooperate deeply with the United States but face hostility from their populations over the matter.

The public pressure on governments is real, and the United States needs to deal with it. The last thing the United States wants to see is relatively cooperative Muslim governments in the region fall due to anti-Israeli or anti-American public sentiment. The issue of Israel and the

United States also creates stickiness in the smooth functioning of relations with these countries. The United States wants to minimize this problem.

It should be understood that many Muslim governments would be appalled if the United States broke with Israel and Israel fell. For example, Egypt and Jordan, facing demographic and security issues of their own, are deeply hostile to at least some Palestinian factions. The vast majority of Jordan's population is actually Palestinian. Egypt struggles with an Islamist movement called the Muslim Brotherhood, which has collaborated with like-minded Islamists among the Palestinians for decades. The countries of the Arabian Peninsula are infinitely more interested in the threat from Iran than in the existence of Israel and, indeed, see Israel as one of the buttresses against Iran. Even Iran is less interested in the destruction of Israel than it is in using the issue as a tool in building its own credibility and influence in the region.

In the Islamic world, public opinion, government rhetoric and government policy have long had a distant kinship. If the United States were actually to do what these countries publicly demand, the private response would be deep concern both about the reliability of the United States and about the consequences of a Palestinian state. A wave of euphoric radicalism could threaten all of these regimes. They quite like the status quo, including the part where they get to condemn the United States for maintaining it.

The United States does not see its relationship with Israel as inhibiting functional state-to-state relationships in the Islamic world, because it hasn't. Washington paradoxically sees a break with Israel as destabilizing to the region. At the same time, the American government understands the political problems Muslim governments face in working with the United States, in particular the friction created by the American relationship with Israel. While not representing a fundamental challenge to American interests, this friction does represent an issue that must be taken into account and managed.

Peace talks are the American solution. Peace talks give the United States the appearance of seeking to settle the Israeli-Palestinian problem. The comings and goings of American diplomats, treating Palestinians as equals in negotiations and as being equally important to the United States, and the occasional photo op if some agreement is actually reached, all give the United States and pro-American Muslim governments a tool — even if it is not a very effective one — for managing Muslim public opinion. Peace talks also give the United States the ability, on occasion, to criticize Israel publicly, without changing the basic framework of the U.S.-Israeli relationship. Most important, they cost the United States nothing. The United States has many diplomats available for multiple-track discussions and working groups for drawing up position papers. Talks do not solve the political problem in the region, but they do reshape perceptions a bit at very little cost. And they give the added benefit that, at some point in the talks, the United States will be able to ask the Europeans to support any solution — or tentative agreement — financially.

Therefore, the Obama administration has been pressuring the Israelis and the PNA, dominated by Fatah, to renew the peace process. Both have been reluctant because, unlike the United States, these talks pose political challenges to the two sides. Peace talks have the nasty habit of triggering internal political crises. Since neither side expects real success, neither

government wants to bear the internal political costs that such talks entail. But since the United States is both a major funder of the PNA and Israel's most significant ally, neither group is in a position to resist the call to talk. And so, after suitable resistance that both sides used for their own ends, the talks begin.

The Israeli problem with the talks is that they force the government to deal with an extraordinarily divided Israeli public. Israel has had weak governments for a generation. These governments are weak because they are formed by coalitions made up of diverse and sometimes opposed parties. In part, this is due to Israel's electoral system, which increases the likelihood that parties that would never enter the parliament of other countries do sit in the Knesset with a handful of members. There are enough of these that the major parties never come close to a ruling majority and the coalition government that has to be created is crippled from the beginning. An Israeli prime minister spends most of his time avoiding dealing with important issues, since his Cabinet would fall apart if he did.

But the major issue is that the Israeli public is deeply divided ethnically and ideologically, with ideology frequently tracking ethnicity. The original European Jews are often still steeped in the original Zionist vision. But Russian Jews who now comprise roughly one-sixth of the population see the original Zionist plan as alien to them. Then there are the American Jews who moved to Israel for ideological reasons. All these splits and others create an Israel that reminds us of the Fourth French Republic between World War II and the rise of Charles de Gaulle. The term applied to it was "immobilism," the inability to decide on anything, so it continued to do whatever it was already doing, however ineffective and harmful that course may have been.

Incidentally, Israel wasn't always this way. After its formation in 1948, Israel's leaders were all part of the leadership that achieved statehood. That cadre is all gone now, and Israel has yet to transition away from its dependence on its "founding fathers." Between less trusted leadership and a maddeningly complex political demography, it is no surprise that Israeli politics can be so caustic and churning.

From the point of view of any Israeli foreign minister, the danger of peace talks is that the United States might actually engineer a solution. Any such solution would by definition involve Israeli concessions that would be opposed by a substantial Israeli bloc — and nearly any Israeli faction could derail any agreement. Israeli prime ministers go to the peace talks terrified that the Palestinians might actually get their house in order and be reasonable — leaving it to Israel to stand against an American solution. Had Ariel Sharon not had his stroke, there might have been a strong leader who could wrestle the Israeli political system to the ground and impose a settlement. But at this point, there has not been an Israeli leader since Menachem Begin who could negotiate with confidence in his position. Benjamin Netanyahu finds himself caught between the United States and his severely fractured Cabinet by peace talks.

Fortunately for Netanyahu, the PNA is even more troubled by talks. The Palestinians are deeply divided between two ideological enemies, Fatah and Hamas. Fatah is generally secular and derives from the Soviet-backed Palestinian movement. Having lost its sponsor, it has drifted toward the United States and Europe by default. Its old antagonist, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, is still there and still suspicious. Fatah tried to overthrow the kingdom in 1970, and

memories are long.

For its part, Hamas is a religious movement, with roots in Egypt and support from Saudi Arabia. Unlike Fatah, Hamas says it is unwilling to recognize the existence of Israel as a legitimate state, and it appears to be quite serious about this. While there seem to be some elements in Hamas that could consider a shift, this is not the consensus view. Iran also provides support, but the Sunni-Shiite split is real and Iran is mostly fishing in troubled waters. Hamas will take help where it can get it, but Hamas is, to a significant degree, funded by the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, so getting too close to Iran would create political problems for Hamas' leadership. In addition, though Cairo has to deal with Hamas because of the Egypt-Gaza border, Cairo is at best deeply suspicions of the group. Egypt sees Hamas as deriving from the same bedrock of forces that gave birth to the Muslim Brotherhood and those who killed Anwar Sadat, forces which pose the greatest future challenge to Egyptian stability. As a result, Egypt continues to be Israel's silent partner in the blockade of Gaza.

Therefore, the PNA dominated by Fatah in no way speaks for all Palestinians. While Fatah dominates the West Bank, Hamas controls Gaza. Were Fatah to make the kinds of concessions that might make a peace agreement possible, Hamas would not only oppose them but would have the means of scuttling anything that involved Gaza. Making matters worse for Fatah, Hamas does enjoy considerable — if precisely unknown — levels of support in the West Bank, and Mahmoud Abbas, the leader of Fatah and the PNA, is not eager to find out how much in the current super-heated atmosphere.

The most striking agreement between Arabs and Israelis was the Camp David Accords negotiated by U.S. President Jimmy Carter. Those accords were rooted in the 1973 war in which the Israelis were stunned by their own intelligence failures and the extraordinary capabilities shown by the Egyptian army so soon after its crushing defeat in 1967. All of Israel's comfortable assumptions went out the window. At the same time, Egypt was ultimately defeated, with Israeli troops on the east shore of the Suez Canal.

The Israelis came away with greater respect for Egyptian military power and a decreased confidence in their own. The Egyptians came away with the recognition that however much they had improved, they were defeated in the end. The Israelis weren't certain they would beat Egypt the next time. The Egyptians were doubtful they could ever beat Israel. For both, a negotiated settlement made sense. The mix of severely shaken confidence and morbid admittance to reality was what permitted Carter to negotiate a settlement that both sides wanted — and could sell to their respective publics.

There has been no similar defining moment in Israeli-Palestinian relations. There is no consensus on either side, nor does either side have a government that can speak authoritatively for the people it represents. On both sides, the rejectionists not only are in a blocking position but are actually in governing roles, and no coalition exists to sweep them aside. The Palestinians are divided by ideology and geography, while the Israelis are "merely" divided by ideology and a political system designed for paralysis.

But the United States wants a peace process, preferably a long one designed to put off the day

when it fails. This will allow the United States to appear to be deeply committed to peace and to publicly pressure the Israelis, which will be of some minor use in U.S. efforts to manipulate the rest of the region. But it will not solve anything. Nor is it intended to.

The problem is that neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians are sufficiently unsettled to make peace. Both Egypt and Israel were shocked and afraid after the 1973 war. Mutual fear is the foundation of peace among enemies. The uncertainty of the future sobers both sides. But the fact right now is that all of the players prefer the status quo to the risks of the future. Hamas doesn't want to risk its support by negotiating and implicitly recognizing Israel. The PNA doesn't want to risk a Hamas uprising in the West Bank by making significant concessions. The Israelis don't want to gamble with unreliable negotiating partners on a settlement that wouldn't enjoy broad public support in a domestic political environment where even simple programs can get snarled in a morass of ideology. Until reality or some as-yet-uncommitted force shifts the game, it is easier for them — all of them — to do nothing.

But the Americans want talks, and so the talks will begin.

Read more: Israeli-Palestinian Peace Talks, Again | STRATFOR