

COMMENTARY

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Kerry's Last-Ditch Efforts

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In his upcoming visit to Israel and Palestine, US Secretary of State John Kerry will attempt a last-ditch effort to persuade Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu and the Palestinian Authority's President Abbas to resume peace negotiations. If there is, however, the slightest chance of getting the two sides to start talking it would require substantial American pressure and commitment to see the peace process through.

Given the regional turmoil, especially in Syria, the question is will the US be prepared to invest that much time and political capital on an uncertain venture when it must now focus on the far more urgent conflict that has the potential to spark regional conflagration.

Moreover, while a small chance may exist to resume the negotiations, neither Netanyahu nor Abbas have a political strategy in place, nor are they taking action on the ground to suggest that they are ready and willing to reach an agreement.

In fact, they have assumed certain positions and pursued policies that have impeded rather than advanced the peace process. Sadly, both Netanyahu and Abbas lack the vision and the courage to change course, depriving their own people of the opportunity to realize their aspirations for peace.

This theme on leadership was pointedly cited by President Nixon in his 1982 book *Leaders*: "Prescience — knowing which way to lead — lies at the heart of great leadership. The very word *leader* implies the ability to act as the guide, to see beyond the present in charting a course into the future."

Netanyahu is an ideologue who has no known political strategy for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and no clue where his policies of expansionism and militarization will lead to in 10 or 15 years.

He is fixated on maintaining a strategy of deterrence, backed by a superior military prowess that can simultaneously tackle military confrontations on multiple fronts while making Israel a military garrison surrounded by fences and walls.

Publicly, he insists that Israel is not an occupying power and that Israel has an inalienable right to the whole “land of Israel” (Israel plus all Palestinian territories). Furthermore, he does not accept the 1967 borders as the basis for negotiating a two-state solution.

He argues that the Palestinians cannot be trusted and that Israel’s national security depends on defensible borders which of “necessity” requires the annexation of a substantial part of the West Bank.

On the practical level, he has and continues to be an ardent advocate of building new and expanding existing settlements; he provides massive financial assistance to settlers and devotes substantial resources for their security.

Meanwhile, he continues to restrict Palestinian movement, limits Israeli-Palestinian interaction and cooperation, and inhibits joint economic projects and mutual visitations between Israelis and Palestinians which serve to build the very trust which he claims is lacking.

Conversely, President Abbas has for some time been a strong advocate of a two-state solution and sought to achieve it through peaceful means. Other than maintaining the calm, though, he did little to prepare the public for peaceful coexistence.

He insisted on a total freeze on building new and expanding existing settlements. When Netanyahu finally agreed, under American pressure, to freeze settlement activity for a year in 2009, he waited 10 months before agreeing to enter negotiations which lasted only two months, to no avail.

While he painted himself into a corner by insisting on a complete freeze on settlements as a precondition to resuming negotiations, he sought and succeeded to elevate the Palestinian status at the United Nations General Assembly to a non-voting observer state.

Although this might have been the right move to make, it made little headway as it has further hardened the Israelis’ position on the settlements problem and been found unhelpful by the Americans who insisted that only direct negotiations could advance the peace process.

Politically, Abbas is deeply troubled by Hamas’ rancorous rivalry with Fatah and its insistence on continuing militant resistance to Israel, which inhibited his ability to manoeuvre politically and increased his political vulnerability. To make up for his precarious political standing, he negotiated unity agreement with Hamas which remains unfulfilled and has further soured relations with Israel.

He remains saddled by pervasive corruption, constrained by continuing financial hardships and infighting within his immediate circle. He failed to support his former Prime Minister Salam

Fayyad, an internationally respected economist, to press for more reforms and stem corruption. Instead, Abbas made his displeasure with Fayyad public knowledge, which led the latter to resign in April 2013.

On the practical level, he continues to promote untenable goals such as the right of return of the Palestinian refugees, giving the Palestinians false hope. Although this was more rhetorical than real, he gave the Israelis another reason to doubt his sincerity.

He turned a blind eye to the systematic maligning of Israel in schools, denying Israel's very existence in textbooks while winking to the Palestinian media that portrays Israel as the source of all evil.

Even a cursory review of the strategic, political and practical approaches that Netanyahu and Abbas pursue explains why they insist on a negotiating strategy that fits their political position and the respective negative public perception they have shaped.

For all intents and purposes, Netanyahu does not accept the two-state solution and is merely paying lip service to Kerry's efforts in order to not further alienate the Obama administration.

He borrowed a page or two from the Iranians by playing for time, which is evident in his insistence on restarting the negotiations unconditionally, which in and of itself is a precondition. Should the negotiations resume under his terms, Netanyahu will certainly seek to first negotiate peripheral issues such as water or discuss trust-building measures, and avoid any substantive matters, especially borders, to define the parameters of two states.

Although Abbas' demand to freeze settlements activity in advance of the resumption of negotiations is justifiable, in hindsight, Abbas made a major tactical mistake by not dropping his precondition of the settlements freeze and calling Netanyahu's bluff.

Unfortunately, instead of siding with Netanyahu to commence the negotiations unconditionally, Kerry should have insisted on negotiating mutually accepted rules of engagement that could offer, at least, a precedent for future negotiations and even a chance for making modest progress. Ideally, Kerry should be able to persuade both Netanyahu and Abbas to abandon any preconditions, clearly identify the conflicting issues, the order in which they should be negotiated, and a timeframe to prevent protracted negotiations.

Starting with borders would clearly be the most practical way, as negotiating borders first would define the parameters of the Palestinian state, which is the single most important issue to be agreed upon.

Moreover, an agreement on borders would resolve at least 75 per cent of the settlement problem; establishing the extent of the land swap would also demonstrate the seriousness of both sides to reach an agreement.

An American presence at the negotiating table at all times would demonstrably show which side, if any, is indeed committed to reaching an agreement. The failure to agree on such principled rules of engagement should leave no doubt as to where Netanyahu and Abbas stand.

The irony here is that repeated polls taken during the past decade consistently show that a majority of Israelis and Palestinians want peace based on a two-state solution. Yet both Netanyahu and Abbas are delaying the inevitable, perhaps at a terrible cost in blood and treasure to their people.

Although I believe that a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains central to regional stability, the horrifying turmoil in Syria and its potential to engulf other states in the region will likely trump the relative calm on the Israeli-Palestinian front.

Thus, should Netanyahu and Abbas fail to seize Obama's likely last effort to achieve an Israeli-Palestinian peace; Secretary Kerry may well abandon his mediating efforts.

The Israeli and Palestinian peoples will have to await the rise of wise and visionary leaders, unshackled by the illusions of their predecessors, leaders who can muster the courage to chart a new path to a peaceful coexistence.

Note: This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/kerrys-last-ditch-effort/>

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