

COMMENTARY

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Where Are The Leaders To Answer The Call?

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No one can accuse Secretary of State John Kerry of not doing his very best to forge an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. His tenacity, commitment and perseverance are exemplary, and if anyone can remotely succeed in ending the conflict, Kerry unquestionably tops the list. Logically, if Kerry did not believe in the prospect of reaching an agreement, he would not have invested this much time, resources and political capital on an enterprise that has eluded so many before him.

The question is why I, like so many other observers, doubt that the current Israeli-Palestinian negotiations will lead to a solution in spite of Kerry's Herculean efforts and Prime Minister Netanyahu's and President Abbas' presumed "commitment" to peace.

There is no easy answer, but what has characterized the intractability of the conflict in the past remains in play today, which is further aggravated by a faulty framework for the negotiations and a lack of commitment to reach an agreement that would of necessity require mutually painful concessions.

The Rules of Engagement

Kerry stated that "[the negotiations] would address all of the core issues that we have been addressing since day one, including borders, security, refugees, Jerusalem, mutual recognition and the end of conflict and of all claims." This sounds compelling, but in reality it is a recipe for failure.

To begin with, the inherent flaw in setting these “rules of engagement” is that it did not place negotiating the conflicting issues in a sequence where a resolution of one would facilitate a solution to another.

Although the negotiations involved all the issues that Kerry enumerated, Netanyahu insisted that Israel’s national security must top the agenda. His demand, however, that Israel retain residual forces in the Jordan Valley only reinforced the Palestinians’ suspicion that the Israeli occupation will indefinitely continue only in another form, which naturally evoked stiff resistance.

Had Kerry insisted that reaching an agreement on borders must come first instead of succumbing to Netanyahu’s demand, he could have paved the road to coming very close to reaching an agreement, not only on Israel’s security concerns but the settlements problem as well.

Ironically, Netanyahu has consistently invoked the need for defensible borders while adamantly refusing to discuss borders first, because he simply does not want to establish at the onset the parameters of a Palestinian state, to which he has not really subscribed.

An agreement on borders would have provided both the practical requirement and the psychological comfort the PA needs to engage in a quid pro quo with the Israelis. This would have allowed Abbas to demonstrate that he has achieved something that has never been achieved before and make him far more flexible to permit certain residual Israeli forces to remain in the Jordan Valley as a part of a UN peacekeeping force for a specified period of time.

Netanyahu’s argument that such a major concession will certainly unravel his government does not explain or justify why holding onto the coalition government is more important than peace. Reaching an agreement with the Palestinians requires a dramatic change in the political landscape and discourse inside Israel.

Any Israeli political leader must place peace on top of his political platform and any prime minister must risk his position or even his life and lead the people to peace, not to the abyss where Netanyahu is leading the country. As of now there is still no agreement on this contentious issue of keeping residual Israeli forces along the Jordan Valley; instead, it is compounding the overall difficulties in negotiating other thorny issues which may well be Netanyahu’s intention.

The Settlements Expansion

Although the rules of engagement did not stipulate that Israel must suspend the construction of new housing units during the negotiations, Kerry’s failure to persuade Netanyahu to suspend construction, or at a minimum do so discreetly and at a slower pace (without deliberate provocation of the Palestinians), has poisoned the atmosphere and deepened the PA’s doubts about Netanyahu’s real intentions.

For good reasons, Abbas was furious when he said “We will not remain patient as the settlement cancer spreads, especially in Jerusalem, and we will use our right as a UN observer state by taking political, diplomatic and legal action to stop it.”

Here too, an agreement on borders first would have established the status of most settlements and determined which will become a part of Israel proper and which will not. Such an initial agreement would allow Israel to expand any of the settlements that fall under its jurisdiction by agreement on the basis of equitable land swaps, even before a comprehensive accord is achieved.

Recognition of Israel as a Jewish state: What has further complicated the negotiations is Netanyahu’s demand that the PA recognize Israel as a Jewish state. The irony here is that Israel does not need any Palestinian government, now or in the future, to recognize Israel as a Jewish state in order for Israel to maintain its Jewish national identity.

There are undoubtedly sinister intentions behind Netanyahu’s demand and unfortunately Kerry fell for it, however illogical and counterproductive it may be. Whether Netanyahu is making this demand to please his hardcore conservative constituency or as a ploy to play for time, or even if he believed that such recognition has real merit because of shifting demographics in Israel’s disfavour that would affect its future national identity, he is being disingenuous at best.

As I have said in an earlier article, Israel’s Jewish national identity can be preserved only through a sustainable Jewish majority. This can be achieved by solving the Palestinian conflict based on a two-state solution, providing greater subsidies to large families, discouraging emigration of Israelis and increasing immigration.

The latter two requirements can be realized only by reaching a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace based on the Arab Peace Initiative (API) which will offer new and exciting opportunities for growth, but it can happen only when an Israeli-Palestinian peace is achieved.

This is what Netanyahu should focus on if he really wants to preserve the Jewish national identity of the state. The continuation of his current policy of continued occupation and settlement expansion will, in fact, jeopardize rather than safeguard the future of Israel as a Jewish state, and no recognition by any country will change this basic sad reality.

Negative Public Narratives

Contrary to the spirit of cooperation and commitment needed to advance the negotiating process, both sides continue to engage in public narratives that raise serious doubts about their real intentions and willingness to make peace.

Netanyahu, Abbas, and other officials on both sides accuse each other, and for good reason, of not negotiating in good faith, thereby further polarizing their respective publics and instilling serious misgivings, which inevitably diminish the prospect of reaching an agreement.

In order to reinforce the notion that there is no partner in the negotiations and to delegitimize the Palestinian claim, Netanyahu said:

“There’s growing doubt in Israel that the Palestinians are committed to peace. In the six months since the start of peace negotiations, the Palestinian Authority continues its unabated incitement against the State of Israel.”

And to further undermine the negotiations, Economy Minister Naftali Bennett said that the ongoing negotiations “have only brought us terror.” On another occasion, he stated that “The nation elected us...to guard the values of the state of Israel, not to pawn our future to Abu Mazen.”

The most outrageous of all public utterances came from Moshe Ya’alon, Israel’s Defence Minister no less, who said that Kerry, “who...is acting out of an incomprehensible obsession and a messianic feeling – cannot teach me a single thing about the conflict with the Palestinians. The only thing that can save us is if Kerry wins the Nobel Prize and leaves us alone.”

It is unfortunate that Kerry did not insist that both sides refrain from such negative public narratives just as he insisted on maintaining secrecy about the substance of the negotiations.

Much damage has already been done, which was worsened by Kerry’s own off-hand public utterances, specifically when he said that “The alternative to getting back to the talks is the potential of chaos. I mean, does Israel want a third intifada?” This kind of statement did nothing but further entrench both sides in their positions.

Truth and Reconciliation

Aside from the conflicting issues, there are profound feelings of hatred, mistrust and unsettling historical accounts that cannot be mitigated automatically on their own. I am prepared to venture that even if an agreement on all other issues is achieved (which is far-fetched), it will be transitory at best.

Concurrent with the negotiations, Kerry should have demanded (and still can) the creation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, made up of apolitical and respected Israelis and Palestinians, to address the grievances against each other to create an atmosphere conducive to enduring peaceful coexistence.

I am absolutely convinced that unless the Israelis and the Palestinians look at each other in the eyes and listen, understand and demonstrate genuine sympathy to each other's painful history and agonizing concerns for the future, current and future peace negotiations will continue to falter.

The process of truth and reconciliation is difficult and disquieting; it has been avoided because it requires self-searching as much as understanding the other's core emotional outrage. But then, Israelis and Palestinians must co-exist in one form or another and cannot continue to live in denial. They need to be shaken to understand that truth and reconciliation is not just an addendum for good measure; it is central to facilitate current negotiations and affect how future Israeli and Palestinian generations view each other.

If both sides are indisputably seeking peace, they must demonstrate that they are ready and willing to engage each other on that human level instead of engaging in continuing mutual recrimination that does nothing but push them further apart and make peace ever more elusive.

Enforcing US Framework

The above point becomes more cogent given the growing scepticism about the possibility of reaching a final agreement by the original deadline in April, which now has given way to a more modest goal of reaching an interim understanding, based on a loose framework soon to be advanced by Kerry.

Perhaps this is the most that Kerry can hope for. That said, given the region's volatility, the spiralling of violent conflicts that surround Israel and the Palestinians, and the growing impatience of the Palestinian public, an interim agreement or even a general framework for peace will not stand the test of time.

Unlike the late Prime Minister Sharon, Netanyahu remains a blind ideologue who has no vision where Israel will be 10 or 15 years down the line and no courage to take corrective steps now to safeguard Israel from compromising its democracy and endangering its Jewish national identity. He continues to wallow in wishful thinking, bringing a greater danger to Israel every day that passes.

Abbas, on the other hand, may be willing to strike a deal but only on his own terms, as he is extremely constrained by limited public support and is running out of time. While Abbas claims to represent all Palestinians, Hamas, which is in total control of Gaza, does not recognize Abbas' authority and is unlikely to accept an accord with Israel that does not fit its self-destructive political agenda.

The lack of courageous and visionary leadership: To be sure, neither Netanyahu nor Abbas have demonstrated bold and visionary leadership which is surely needed at this fateful juncture. The

Israeli-Palestinian annals are saturated with self-denial and resistance to the inevitable and there is little evidence that much has changed.

Thus, it is illusionary to assume that presenting the Israelis and Palestinians with a framework will in fact pave the way for a peace agreement at some point in the near future. To put it bluntly, only direct American pressure can produce real results, provided that both Netanyahu and Abbas fully understand that there will be serious consequences if they defy the US.

There is no better or closer ally to either Israel or the Palestinians than the US and it is the only country that can provide both sides the political cover they need; it can also use coercion and/or inducements to compel them to find the middle ground to reach an agreement.

The threat of withholding political support from Israel in international forums will go a long way to convince Netanyahu and other Israeli leaders that the day of reckoning is here. Similar political and economic pressure on Abbas will seriously resonate with the Palestinians, who cannot afford to dismiss America's crucial support.

In this context, Kerry should reinvigorate the API and ask the leading Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and others that actually support the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, to be more vociferous publicly in support of his peace offensive. Abbas needs the Arab states' political and economic support and the Israeli public needs to be persuaded that the Arab world overwhelming supports the peace negotiations.

There are those who claim, and rightfully so, that considering congressional resistance and the stiff opposition of the powerful evangelical constituency and the so-called Jewish lobby, the Obama administration will be reluctant to force Israel to make any concession to the Palestinians which is not to its liking.

This of course may well be true, but then again if the US is serious about achieving peace and believes that it is best for Israel and that time is of the essence, it can no longer dilly-dally with mediation efforts that go nowhere. Here too, leadership matters; the president cannot settle for preaching the gospel of peace and leave John Kerry to sink or swim.

The US has massive strategic interests in the Middle East and it needs an Israeli-Palestinian peace just as much as they need it to prevent another major conflagration that is certain to come if the current conditions persist.

The Middle East will experience unprecedented turmoil for years to come. There may not a better time to achieve an Israeli-Palestinian peace than now, but where are the leaders that can answer the call?

Note: This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/where-are-the-leaders-to-answer-the-call/>

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