

Incremental Goals Are Key in Kerry's Peace Quest

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - May 20, 2013

TEL AVIV -- This week, Secretary of State John Kerry will make his fourth visit to the Middle East since becoming America's top diplomat less than four months ago. It's not because he needs the frequent-flier miles.

In separate meetings with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, Kerry will attempt to re-launch peace negotiations that, but for a few rounds of talks poorly orchestrated by the Obama administration in 2010, have been at a standstill since 2008, when Abbas declined to answer a proposal advanced by then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert for a final and comprehensive solution to the protracted conflict between the two sides.

To make progress, Kerry will need to distinguish (as so many before him have not) between the long-term goal and viable short-term steps. The official position of Israel, the Palestinian Authority, the United States, and much of the international community is that the conflict can only be settled through the creation of a Palestinian state existing side-by-side in peace and security with Israel. To advance that goal, daunting obstacles, frequently invisible but hiding in plain sight, must be addressed.

Perhaps no prominent figure in the last four years has come further in grasping these obstacles than Barack Obama. To be sure, he had a long way to go. In his first term, the president appeared to subscribe to the typical liberal view that the main obstacles to peace were Bibi Netanyahu's lack of will, and Israeli settlements beyond the Green Line (the 1949 armistice lines in place on June 4, 1967, before Israel defeated Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in a defensive war that left the Jewish state in control of the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights).

In his June 2009 Cairo speech, Obama argued that to achieve peace not only must Israel cease building in the settlements but Palestinians must end violence against Israel, affirm past agreements, and recognize Israel's right to exist. But in 2010, when it came time to bring the parties together, Obama pressured Netanyahu to make painful concessions before official discussions with the Palestinians began -- Netanyahu agreed to a 10-month freeze on settlement building beyond the Green Line -- but Obama did not request and did not receive pre-negotiation concessions from Abbas.

Israelis resented such one-sidedness in advance of talks; Palestinians drew the conclusion that they also would not need to compromise after sitting down at the negotiating table. Inevitably, negotiations went nowhere before quickly collapsing.

Obama's March trip to Israel this year signaled a significant change in orientation. He made evident, particularly in a March 21 speech in Jerusalem, that he realized that obstacles to achieving peace stemmed at least as much from the Palestinian side as from the Israelis'.

Accustomed to hearing mainly reproaches and denunciations from Europe and the United States -- most of them to the effect that if only Israel would act decently, peace could be established -- such evenhandedness felt to Israelis like a warm embrace.

The president also indicated that Palestinians must not merely recognize Israel but recognize it as a Jewish state. Such recognition is not an empty gesture or a matter of semantics.

The Palestinians understand that recognizing Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people would mean waiving the interpretation of the Palestinian "right of return," by which approximately 5 million refugees in camps in the Gaza Strip, West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and scattered around the world would automatically be eligible to become Israeli citizens, a right that, if exercised, would swamp Israel, whose total population is only about 7.7 million. (Owing to an aberration in international law, Palestinians are the only people in the world who pass refugee status on to their children). Palestinian refusal to relent on the interpretation of the right of return is perhaps the single greatest obstacle to bringing the conflict to an end.

While in Jerusalem, Obama also modified the opinion he expressed in Cairo four years earlier when he suggested that Israel's existence was primarily justified as a response to the horrors of the Holocaust. That account bolsters the Palestinian narrative holding that Israel is a colonialist enterprise, a foreign imposition on their lands, an act of European atonement at Arab expense for European crimes against the Jews. Instead, Obama emphasized that Israel's identity as the nation state of the Jewish people is grounded in an ancestral connection to the land that extends back thousands of years as well as in the right Jews share with other peoples of the world to be free and self-governing.

Finally, in Jerusalem the president abandoned the idea that the parties must fulfill preconditions before entering negotiations. To be sure, confidence-building measures undertaken by both sides would be most welcome. But negotiations, when begun with the proper expectations, can in themselves serve as a powerful confidence-building measure.

Despite the substantial progress the president has made in grasping the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he still has a ways to go. In Jerusalem, Obama rightly observed that "the Palestinian people's right to self-determination, their right to justice, must also be recognized."

Then he patronizingly admonished the predominantly younger crowd that his advance team had gathered for the speech to "put yourself in their shoes," particularly the shoes of Palestinian children who grow up without a state of their own and under the authority of a foreign army.

The president seemed to be saying that if only Israelis could bring themselves to appreciate that Palestinians were human beings too, then peace could be had. But Israelis know that Palestinians are human beings. The problem is that Israelis also know that Palestinian adults continue to teach their children that Israel is an outlaw nation. And Israelis know that they must deal with the serious security issues that spring from the Palestinian leadership's deliberate perpetuation of enmity across generations.

Had Obama heeded his own admonition and put himself in the shoes of Palestinians, he would have seen that much of Palestinian political identity is based on a negation of Zionism and a hatred of Israel that is routinely promulgated by Palestinian schools and mosques; Palestinian Authority-run newspapers, TV, and radio; and Palestinian political leaders, including Abbas, particularly when he speaks in Arabic.

In attempting to renew the peace process, Kerry faces not only deeply rooted obstacles but also challenges that are very much of the moment. Although a clear majority in Israel favors a two-state solution, Israelis across the political spectrum are exhausted from decades of failed negotiations and spurned peace offers.

They are also preoccupied with a fiscal crisis of their own, which despite the incredible success of the nation's high-tech sector, has hit the middle class hard and has depleted resources for the poor. Israelis are acutely aware of the turmoil that surrounds them: Egypt is struggling to feed its population; Hezbollah in southern Lebanon continues to be armed by Iran with increasingly powerful missiles; in Syria, the two-year old civil war has, according to estimates, claimed more than 90,000 lives; and in Jordan, King Abdullah faces a destabilizing Muslim Brotherhood movement of his own. Understandably, many Israelis are in a particularly cautious mood.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian house is in disorder. Poisonous relations prevail between the Hamas-led government in Gaza and the Fatah-lead Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. Even in the West Bank, Hamas enjoys considerable support and constitutes a serious threat to Palestinian Authority supremacy. And a month ago, in the midst of a power struggle within the Palestinian Authority, Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, widely admired in the United States as a pragmatic reformer, tendered his resignation to Abbas.

In these inauspicious circumstances, an American secretary of state should not seek to convene another international conference and should not unfurl a new comprehensive plan. Rather, Kerry should encourage regular high-level meetings at suitable intervals between Netanyahu and Abbas.

He should foster greater cooperation between Israel and the Palestinians to improve physical infrastructure for West Bank Palestinians, including for the delivery of fresh water, the removal of sewage, and the transmission of electricity. He should urge Israel to continue to

crack down on Israeli lawbreakers in the West Bank, who harass Palestinians and build without proper permits.

He should also condition a significant portion of America's generous foreign aid to the Palestinian Authority on a reduction of PA-sanctioned incitement of hatred against Israel. And perhaps most importantly, Kerry should insist that the Palestinians recognize, publicly and in Arabic as well as in English, Israel's right to govern itself as a Jewish and democratic state, and that they affirm, publicly and in Arabic as well as in English, that the Palestinian right of return does not apply inside Israel's border.

At present, less is more in pursuing a resolution to the conflict. If Kerry fails to learn the hard lessons of the last four years of the president he serves, if the American secretary of state tries to rush a final agreement in one grand concentrated burst of diplomatic activity, then he is likely to fail -- and that foreseeable failure is likely to intensify cynicism in the region about America's competence and heighten disgust with the peace process among those on both sides.

If, however, in light of the long-term goal of two states for two peoples, Kerry patiently pursues incremental reforms and small improvements, then the United States will have a decent prospect of leaving Israelis and Palestinians better off than they might otherwise have been.

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