

10 Roadblocks to Mideast Peace

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TEL AVIV -- Monday night, in a painful concession engineered by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, Israel released 26 Palestinian terrorists, many convicted of murdering civilians. Undertaken by Israel as a goodwill gesture to advance peace negotiations, it was the third of four such prisoner releases.

Meanwhile, on Sunday, the Knesset Ministerial Committee for Legislation voted to annex Jordan River Valley civilian settlements (a provocation that will not become law), and the Finance Committee approved an additional appropriation of approximately \$17 million for settlement activity. Days earlier, in advance of a move sure to be denounced by Palestinians and bound to increase tensions with the Obama administration, an Israeli government official said that soon after the prisoner release Israel would announce the building of 1,400 new houses in the West Bank.

In so doing, the Israeli government went to considerable lengths to achieve peace while simultaneously proceeding with a political agenda that undermines negotiations.

Ambivalence is by no means restricted to the government. Here in Israel's frenetic cultural and commercial center, numerous conversations -- with bartenders and venture capitalists, cabdrivers and university professors, left and center and right, and senior members of the national security establishment -- converged in a common view: It would be wonderful for Kerry to bring the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to an end through the establishment, consistent with Israel's security requirements, of a Palestinian state. But don't count on it, because major roadblocks stand in the way.

Israelis close to the negotiations have been impressed with Kerry's energy and good intentions. He has visited their nation about once a month since taking office in February 2013 and is due back at the end of this week. He has assembled an impressive negotiating team. But there is also a widespread sense that the would-be peace broker has failed to reckon with the conflict's complexities and, by asking more from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas than they can reasonably be expected to deliver, might subvert the relative calm in the West Bank and reignite hostilities in Gaza.

As if on cue, a new round of Palestinian terrorism struck the country last week. On Dec. 22, disaster was averted in the coastal city of Bat Yam, just south of Tel Aviv. Vigilant bus passengers called a suspicious object to the attention of the driver, who promptly evacuated

passengers moments before it detonated. Hamas and Islamic Jihad publicly praised the attack. On Dec. 23, a Palestinian stabbed an Israeli police officer in the back at a checkpoint between Jerusalem and Ramallah. And on Dec. 24, an Arab citizen of Israel working in construction for the ministry of defense near the Gaza border was killed by Palestinian sniper fire.

Abbas has yet to condemn any of the attacks, a refusal that has reinforced

Israeli doubts about Palestinians' desire for peace. But the upswing in terror, a foreseeable reaction by Palestinian extremists who prefer armed struggle, should not be allowed to obscure the still more significant obstacles to peace. Many are rooted in mainstream Palestinian political culture. A few arise from the Israeli side, and one is a consequence of a widely noted shift in American Middle East policy.

Here are 10 of them:

First, and most important, the PA refuses to renounce a supposed "right of return," which it asserts would give some 5 million pre-1967 Palestinian Arabs access to property and citizenship in Israel. The vast majority of these Palestinians are descendants of the approximately 650,000 Arabs who fled Israel in 1947 and 1948 (most by their own choice) before and during a war in which five Arab armies invaded and sought to destroy the just-declared Jewish state. There is no precedent in international law for such a right, and its exercise would destroy Israel as a Jewish state.

Second, while Abbas and lead Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat claim to acknowledge Israel's right to exist, they refuse to recognize Israel as a Jewish state. The Netanyahu government maintains that formal public acceptance of Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people is vital because it signals that the PA does not seek to use the establishment of a state of its own as a steppingstone toward the creation of a single majority Palestinian state enveloping Israel.

Third, Abbas categorically rejected Kerry's recent proposal that the Israel Defense Forces remain in the Jordan River Valley for 10 years after a peace agreement goes into effect. Speaking after an emergency meeting in Cairo on Dec. 21, Arab League Secretary General Nabil Elaraby emphatically backed Abbas, declaring that under any acceptable peace agreement, not one Israeli soldier would be permitted to remain in the valley. The Netanyahu government, however, is convinced that no matter how sincere Kerry's assurances are, only Israel is capable of ensuring that dangerous weapons and murderous jihadists do not infiltrate from Jordan.

Fourth, the PA shows no signs of desisting its incitement of hatred for Jews and Israel. Its schools and government-run media continue to celebrate terrorists who kill Israeli civilians and to nurture the hope that one day Palestinians will return to homes inside pre-1967 Israel

that their grandparents abandoned 65 years ago. This systematic incitement only intensifies Israeli demands for security concessions unacceptable to the PA, including free movement of the IDF within Palestinian cities.

Fifth, the six-year civil war between the PA, which rules in the West Bank, and Hamas, which rules in the Gaza Strip, means Abbas can make no plausible claim to speak for almost half of all Palestinians in the territories beyond the Green Line.

Sixth, even within the West Bank, the PA is dysfunctional. It lacks support among the public. It suffers from widespread and endemic corruption. Were the IDF to withdraw, the PA could fall to Hamas.

Seventh, the uprisings that erupted in the Arab world in the winter of 2011 have destabilized Israel's neighbors. The military government in Egypt that ousted the Muslim Brotherhood government that replaced ousted President Hosni Mubarak is wrestling with a tottering economy and terrorists in the Sinai. Lebanon, with a population of 4 million, is struggling with approximately 850,000 refugees from Syria's civil war. Jordan, with a population of 6.5 million, is straining to deal with approximately 570,000 Syrian refugees. As Israel's dangerous neighborhood has become more dangerous, the Netanyahu government has redoubled its determination to secure terms, likely to be rejected by the PA, that guarantee Israel's ability to defend itself.

Eighth, notwithstanding Kerry's engagement with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israelis see a vacillating and timid America seeking to disengage from the region. The Obama administration has projected an opaque approach to Egypt, led from behind in Libya, acquiesced to a Russian-brokered deal in Syria that confirms Bashar al-Assad as president, and negotiated an interim agreement with Tehran that threatens to recognize Iran as a nuclear threshold state. These developments harden Israel's negotiating stance and confirm its longstanding policy that Israel and Israel alone must take ultimate responsibility for its security.

Ninth, Israeli building in the West Bank complicates negotiations not least because Palestinians, the Obama administration, and much of the world adamantly oppose it. Whether Netanyahu desires settlement expansion, pressures from within his coalition impel him to support some, which is the kind of domestic political constraint that Kerry appears not to have adequately considered.

Tenth, while the Israeli public overwhelmingly supports peace, considerable segments of it, when they pay attention to current negotiations at all, regard them with apathy. The apathy stems from Palestinian and Arab rejection of past peace plans, from former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's far-reaching 2008 offer to the 1937 Peel Commission partition plan. And apathy is reinforced by decades of vicious Palestinian terrorist attacks on Israel's civilian population, which have scarred citizens' political imagination.

If Kerry manages to overcome these many obstacles, he will earn his place in history, along with Netanyahu and Abbas. If Kerry fails, as have his many predecessors in the quest for a final status agreement, perhaps America foreign policy makers will learn from long and bitter experience and adopt a different approach.

Instead of presuming to understand better than the locals the complexities of domestic politics and regional dynamics, and rather than forcing a final resolution that the parties are unwilling or unable to enforce, American diplomats might want to concentrate instead on constructing the physical, economic, and political infrastructure of a Palestinian state. Such work is gradual, slow, and arduous. It is decidedly less glamorous than high-level negotiations. But shouldn't American diplomats be less interested in glamour, and more interested in forging the institutions under which Palestinians and Israelis can live side by side in peace and security?

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