

Kerry's Visit: America Has No Choice but to Reengage in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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Expectations for Secretary Kerry's trip to Jerusalem and Ramallah are low, but given the mounting violence, he must nevertheless ask each side to take separate de-escalatory steps.

Today, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry is back to Jerusalem and Ramallah for the first time in a year. Kerry's efforts last month produced an Israeli-Jordanian understanding that calmed things on the highly volatile Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif holy site in Jerusalem, yet violence between Israelis and Palestinians continues and has spread beyond Jerusalem. While the United States has rightly assessed that Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas are not the leaders to make peace, Kerry's upcoming visit yet again demonstrates that the United States has no choice but to reengage and try to calm an escalating crisis.

Kerry's trip is part of an effort by the United States and its Quartet partners (EU, UN, and Russia) to convince both sides to take a series of steps that avoid future violence and improve the situation on the ground so as to address what Israel's Shin Bet security service has recently described as "feelings of national, economic and personal deprivation" driving much of the violence. Ultimately, only a peace deal can bring lasting stability. But since such a deal is not currently in the cards, the immediate task is avoiding deterioration and preserving the possibility that an agreement can be negotiated in the future.

There are a number of steps the United States should ask the parties to take in the months ahead. The U.S. should not try to get the sides to negotiate any future steps between them. This will only lead to a stalemate. Instead, the U.S.

should separately engage each side to do its part, and in doing so, create a set of mutually reinforcing unilateral steps.

For the Palestinians, the first step must be addressing incitement. President Abbas has a longstanding commitment to non-violence -- one that is genuine. But his extreme public statements, such as accusing Israel of executing a 13 year old Palestinian boy who at the time was recovering in an Israeli hospital, only fuel the fire. Inflammatory rhetoric originating from Palestinian officials is one of the most significant obstacles standing in the way of convincing the Israeli public of the Palestinians' commitment to peace. Such statements contribute to creating a charged atmosphere that fosters the terror we have witnessed recently. When President Abbas resorts to hardline rhetoric -- even if he does not call for or endorse violence -- in an attempt to shore up his domestic credentials, he effectively feeds into a narrative that is antithetical to his commitment to non-violence.

There must also be a renewed effort on Palestinian institution-building. A striking feature of the current round of violence is the extent to which it seems to be fully outside the control of the Palestinian Authority due to its fast-eroding credibility. Part of this credibility deficit can be attributed to the failure of the peace process, but part is due to the PA's failure to provide effective, representative governance. When, as recent polls indicate, 79% of Palestinians believe that their government is corrupt, they are unlikely to look toward it for moral and political guidance. The United States should again prioritize Palestinian institution-building, and instead of giving President Abbas a free pass on this matter, should press him to relaunch a reform program to rehabilitate the PA in the eyes of its own people.

For its part, Israel must show greater restraint in its settlement policy in the West Bank -- an issue that not only causes deep frustration among Palestinians but threatens to eliminate the prospects for a two-state solution. It will be impossible for the United States to obtain a full settlement freeze from Israel. And the United States should not change its policy of opposing all settlement construction.

But it can make clear to Israel that the most egregious construction in areas that threaten the two-state solution will result in greater consequences for the U.S.-Israel relationship. Building on the very edge of the map in highly contested parts of the West Bank or in areas that will cut off significant Palestinian populations from their future state is not the same as building right on the other side of the 1967 lines in an area that is unlikely to be contested.

Israel should also be pressed to do more to improve the situation on the ground in the West Bank. There is a long list of steps that could be taken. For example, measures must be taken to improve the Palestinian economy such as providing economic access to areas of the West Bank under Israeli control. It should also include allowing for Palestinian construction in areas adjacent to congested Palestinian urban centers. Such steps will not end the conflict, but they would allow Palestinians engaged in cooperation with Israel to point out some benefits to their non-violent approach.

Finally, the United States should continue and deepen its support for training the Palestinian Security Forces. Over the past ten years, this program has been the single most important positive development within the context of the conflict. These forces are serious and professional. Their relationship with their Israeli counterparts is strong. And they have had a profound effect on improving security for Israelis and Palestinians alike.

But the program needs to be taken to the next level, with deeper investments in establishing a justice sector that can complement these forces and ensure that after suspects are arrested, if they are indeed guilty, they can be tried, convicted, and jailed instead of being arbitrarily released or held. And Israel also needs to do a better job of handing greater responsibility to these forces, and allowing them greater mobility across the West Bank to ensure security.

Politically, the United States should dissuade Abbas from threatening to sever security cooperation, as these statements erode the domestic legitimacy of Palestinian security forces engaged in cooperation with their Israeli

counterparts. The United States should also encourage Netanyahu to give a freer hand to the Israeli military to implement long-proposed measures on the ground that the IDF believes would improve the situation of the Palestinians in the West Bank.

Given the dysfunctionality and distrust on both sides, even this modest agenda will be no easy task to implement and will require months of grueling work by American diplomats. This policy agenda will not lead to a dramatic transformation on the ground and the breakthrough that so many of us yearn for. But it will reduce the frequency of violent flare ups, preserve the two-state solution, and leave the window open for better opportunities in the future.

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