

Are Negotiations a New Opportunity Being Lost by the Palestinians?

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Brief Analysis

Allowing preconditions to scuttle the latest peace effort will only lead to more Palestinian regrets.

Recently, there has been talk of the Palestinian "no"s, which have replaced the Arab League's three "no"s of the Khartoum summit in 1967 -- no negotiations, no reconciliation, no recognition. Although some writers have voiced their support for the current stance of the Palestinian Authority vis-a-vis the unsettled issues between Israelis and Palestinians, others believe that they will meet the same fate as the stipulations of the Khartoum Summit, rendering the negotiations a lost opportunity for the Palestinian people.

The first "no" concerns the Israeli condition related to the recognition of Israel as a "Jewish state." On this, it is unclear why the Palestinian position is so rigid. Israel's condition has no relation to memory, conscience, or the Palestinian, Arab, and Islamic "narrative" of the history of the Palestinian issue and the Arab-Israeli struggle, nor is it related to the refugees' right to return and reparations, or to Palestinian green line "citizenship." Palestinians have already recognized the Jewish nature of the state of Israel as represented by its name. After such recognition, what concern is it of the Palestinians whether Israel wishes to be Jewish or secular or democratic or Christian? If Israel went before the United Nations tomorrow and presented a request to change its name from the "State of Israel" to the "Jewish State of Israel," as some Muslim countries such as Libya and Iran have done to add "Islamic" to their name, would the Palestinian Authority object before the UN? And would the world take us seriously if we did?

The Israeli voices behind this condition seek to provoke the Palestinians into displaying more rigidity in order to blame them for the failure of negotiations, as occurred when the UN resolution was issued calling for the partition of Palestine in 1947. The Israeli demand related to it being a "Jewish" state is a mirage. If we look at it closely, it will disappear.

The second "no" is related to East Jerusalem, meaning old Jerusalem inside the city walls where sanctified religious

places converge. The question is: why isn't this religiously and historically significant place given a special international status so that everyone is responsible for its care and oversight? Outside the walls, practically speaking, Jerusalem has grown into a city that is not highly religious. It has been built by adding successive Arab and Israeli municipalities to the city. This Jerusalem is divided into Israeli Jerusalem and Arab Jerusalem, separated by psychological and political barriers without any actual wall or barricade. Saying the city is united does not reflect the reality on the ground. The aim of Israel's obstinacy is to push Palestinians to take up rigid positions in order to make negotiations collapse and Kerry's mission fail, and to put an end to the peace process.

The third "no" relates to the Israeli presence in the Jordan Valley on the border of the Palestinian state. Palestinians have accepted that a third power under the United Nations -- be it NATO or American-led, national or international -- should be stationed in this area. Yet, though this notion is agreed upon or accepted in principle, if a peace agreement is signed, then Israel will technically be treated just like any other foreign country, but with greater abilities and expertise to protect Palestinian towns and areas against terrorism and daily bombs in markets and mosques, as is the case in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Baghdad, and Afghanistan. On this point, what matters to Palestinians is that Israeli forces alone not be concentrated at the doors of the Palestinian state, deciding what to prohibit and what to allow, as if we are in a great prison. The stationing of a single third power on the borders in these areas won't protect the Palestinian state from the terrorism of hostile powers that will bring to Palestine the woes that a number of the region's peoples currently suffer. Therefore, it is necessary to coordinate with Jordan in order to make Palestinian-Jordanian-Israeli security arrangements, in addition to setting up technologically advanced equipment to monitor the borders. Direct Palestinian-Jordanian-Israeli military presence, along with setting up technologically advanced equipment to monitor the borders and building an advanced security wall, is the ideal solution to guard the 250km long valley. No one power alone will be able to close the border or ensure security and adequate protection to prevent terrorist organizations from crossing over into the urban areas inside.

The fourth "no" is related to the Israeli condition that the Palestinian state be demilitarized. Though this demand currently seems to detract from Palestinian sovereignty, in the future, it might become clear that this is in fact in the Palestinians' best interest. If the state is demilitarized, funds can be allocated to state building, fueling the economy, and improving social conditions rather than going to military spending. When the allied powers decided at the end of World War II that Japan and Germany must be demilitarized, the Japanese and German people used their budgets to rebuild their countries and became two of the world's industrial superpowers. Conversely, one of the reasons behind the Shah of Iran's fall was his use of oil revenues to purchase advanced weapons instead of using the funds to improve the conditions of the Iranian people.

There are other "no"s that can also be negotiated. The Palestinian negotiating position should accord with the lower limits of the terms on which the peace process was based. But they must do so without seeming obstinate or rigid simply for the sake of appearing not to show any "flexibility" or "excess."

Adopting this logic, it is possible for Kerry's mission to succeed, reaching a peace that secures a future for our children. There is clearly a great difference in the balance of power between the two parties, and the Israelis always repeat among themselves: "Why would we want peace and give up land? We won the war and if we'd lost the war, we would have lost everything." They also suffer from the Holocaust experience that has made them believe in the refrain: "What happened won't happen again."

Thus, Kerry has built his strategy on the idea that an agreement must first be reached with the Israelis, and then negotiations can occur with the Palestinians to find points of agreement between the two, putting pressure on both parties to be flexible on their positions. In doing this, he has used European, Jewish, and American pressure on the Israelis and Arab pressure on the Palestinians. It will be fortunate for both parties if Kerry is able to obtain satisfactory results in the negotiations, having postponed his 11th tour. He is currently waiting for Israel to finish its own negotiations and then those with Washington, in order to bring the Palestinians to the table and negotiate with them

on the results of the American-Israeli negotiations.

The Israeli extreme right seeks to make the negotiations fail, placing the responsibility on the Palestinian leadership in order to stop American and European aid. If Kerry fails and leaves, he won't have any excuse or need to return to the region again, leaving the Palestinians vulnerable to aggression, settlements, and occupation. This is the strategy of the Israeli extremists who oppose peace.

At the same time, I must reject the claim that all Israelis are opposed to peace and all Palestinians want peace. There is a camp containing Palestinians and Israelis who seek peace up against a camp that contains Palestinians and Israelis who are opposed to peace and seek to abort the peace efforts.

When Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser accepted the Rogers Plan proposed by the U.S. Secretary of State in 1968, the Palestinians refused it outright based on the slogans of hardliners. He left and didn't come back. And when Egyptian president Anwar Sadat invited us to come with him to Camp David in 1978 for negotiations, we stood with the extremists and called him a traitor. He went without us, and we regret that to this day. Why don't we learn from the lessons of the past and listen to those in the middle, for the sake of our children's future?

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