To Get an Israeli-Palestinian Agreement, U.S. Needs to Re-engage in the Mideast

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Articles & Testimony

Reaching an agreement may require deep involvement not just in the Israeli-Palestinian talks, but in the conflicts, politics, and alliances of a region from which Washington has appeared keen to disengage of late.

Having coaxed Israelis and Palestinians back to the negotiating table after an unprecedented drought of talks, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry can claim at least a measure of vindication for his seemingly single-minded focus on the peace process. But now that negotiations have commenced, that same single-mindedness could prove the talks' undoing and the unraveling of Kerry's achievement.

In approaching the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Kerry was wise to put aside the settlements-first approach that bedeviled the Obama administration's first term. The process that Kerry has put together appears instead to pick up, structurally speaking at least, where the 2007-2008 "Annapolis process" between then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas left off.

That process comprised not only high-level talks on the so-called "core issues" of borders, refugees, and Jerusalem, but also a number of other pillars: economic cooperation and institution-building, Palestinian security reform, regional security cooperation, and Arab-Israeli rapprochement. Kerry has quietly pursued similar tracks, announcing a multibillion-dollar initiative to bolster the Palestinian economy, naming Gen. John Allen as an envoy for regional security issues, and securing the endorsement of the Arab League for his proposals, all in recent weeks.

However, the challenges now facing the parties are much steeper than those at the time of Annapolis.

The first and foremost of these challenges is the turmoil gripping the surrounding region. The Arab League's endorsement is just the first and easiest contribution regional states will be asked to make. To ensure its security can be maintained despite the loss of West Bank territories, Israel will need to reach cooperative arrangements -- not just the sometimes frosty peace that exists today -- with Egypt and Jordan. For a Palestinian state to succeed, it will

need intimate commercial and economic links -- not just the hand-to-mouth aid received today -- with neighbors.

But today the neighborhood is more a source of distraction than support for the Israelis and Palestinians. Israeli leaders worry about chaos in Syria and Egypt, as well as the burden imposed on Lebanon and Jordan by the Syrian civil war. They worry even more about Iran and its nuclear ambitions and regional adventurism. For his part, Abbas must worry about the regional resurgence of political Islam, of which his rival, Hamas, is the local manifestation. Allies that were once staunchly supportive, such as Turkey and Qatar, have recently been more supportive of Abbas's Islamist rivals, while other former stalwarts like Egypt and Jordan are consumed with internal issues.

Another major challenge facing Israel and the Palestinians is the position of the United States in the region. The United States has long been looked toward as not only an honest broker in the peace process, but a guarantor of whatever arrangements that process produced and of Israel's security as it gives up hard-won territory. It is no accident that major episodes in the peace process have coincided with major U.S. security commitments to the region.

Now, both U.S. roles are in question. Washington's position as an honest broker is a function not of its neutrality or equidistance from the two parties, but of its closeness to both. Despite being perceived as pro-Israel, the United States has also been the most consistent and pragmatic advocate of a Palestinian state and contributor of aid and expertise to the Palestinian Authority. Under President Barack Obama, the United States and Israel have drifted apart, and the U.S.-Palestinian relationship has also soured as Abbas has expressed bitterness over shifts in American strategy and pursued gambits at the United Nations disapproved of by Washington.

The United States' role as guarantor can also no longer be easily assumed. The widespread perception in the Middle East is that the United States is experiencing "Mideast fatigue" in the wake of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and would prefer to disengage. This has manifested itself not only in the uncertainty that marks U.S. policy in places like Egypt and Syria, but in deteriorating alliances across the region. This inevitably will reduce the value and credibility of U.S. security assurances to both the Israelis and the Palestinians, for which there is no alternative outside power to turn.

The final challenge the parties face is themselves. The Annapolis conference took place following years of violence -- the Second Intifada in the first part of the decade, followed by the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. In contrast, the past five years have largely been peaceful, providing no great incentive to depart from the status quo.

Both parties also face internal challenges: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu must balance compromise with the Palestinians against the views of coalition partners and members of his own party who are skeptical that territorial concessions will bring peace or security. Abbas must deal not only with Islamists who continue to preach war against Israel, but also his own apparent reluctance to sign on the dotted line. After his predecessor, Yasir Arafat, rejected an Israeli offer in 2000 at Camp David and he rejected an even more far-reaching offer in 2008, it is reasonable to question whether Abbas has the strength or confidence to compromise.

It is these challenges on which the United States must now focus. This is one of the paradoxes of the peace process: If the United States wants a peace agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians, it must focus on everything but the so-called "core issues" that will be at the heart of the negotiations. It has been frequently but incorrectly claimed that the solutions to those issues are well-known; the broad outlines may be clear, but the devil is truly in the details, which are anything but. Nevertheless, those details must be worked out by the parties who know them well and can in any event draw upon the myriad plans and ideas already put forward.

For its part, Washington should run interference for the two parties -- thwarting the efforts of spoilers to derail the process, lining up support from regional and international partners whose priorities are elsewhere, bolstering Netanyahu and Abbas to the extent possible, and, in so doing, providing space to the Israelis and Palestinians to

negotiate. This implies an altogether different approach to the Middle East than that which has characterized the first five years of Obama's tenure -- one that stresses deep engagement not simply in the Israeli-Palestinian talks themselves, but in the conflicts, politics, and alliances of the region from which Washington has of late appeared keen to disengage.

Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute. ❖

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