

Kerry Stands a Chance with Israelis and Palestinians

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Brief Analysis

Secretary Kerry may be able to exceed low expectations about the prospects of relaunching Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

In his latest round of talks culminating early this week, Secretary of State John Kerry spent close to twenty hours in separate meetings with Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas. Afterward, he declared that "real progress" had been made and that the parties could be within grasp of launching final-status negotiations.

LOW EXPECTATIONS

Kerry has visited the Middle East five times over the past few months, yet peace-process expectations have been low for each trip due to several factors:

- *Although numerous polls clearly show that Israelis and Palestinians favor a two-state solution, each side has convinced the other that they do not, and that an agreement is therefore impossible at the moment.* For example, in a just-released joint poll by Hebrew University's Harry Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace and the Ramallah-based Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, 68 percent of Israelis and 69 percent of Palestinians said that the chances of establishing an independent Palestinian state next to Israel in the next five years are low or nonexistent. Both sides see past diplomatic failures as vindicating their prism of analysis, creating deep skepticism about the prospects for progress.
- *Netanyahu and Abbas have been hesitant.* At a Likud Party meeting this week, Netanyahu declared that he did not want to publicly announce concessions because it would only weaken Israel's bargaining position. On a more basic level, both leaders are risk-averse; neither wants to get out ahead of the public or be branded as quixotic. They are also convinced that any progress would mobilize hardline elements within their own polity to take action against them. Thus far, they have preferred to let sleeping critics lie.
- *Kerry's style engenders low expectations.* The secretary's statements about the peace process tend to be discounted

publicly as the honeyed words of a career politician, in large part because he does not release tantalizing details that might support his claims. Kerry used a similar "close hold" style in meetings with dignitaries when he served as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, believing it was key to avoiding complications that might hinder diplomatic breakthroughs.

- *Even the pre-negotiations phase is heavily loaded.* Contrary to public perceptions, the crux of the impasse is not about arranging a meeting between Netanyahu and Abbas -- under normal circumstances, that could be done fairly easily. In the Israeli-Palestinian context, however, the pre-negotiations phase is deeply substantive. Fairly or not, Abbas believes that Israel needs direct talks more than he does, based on frequent mention (by Israelis and others) of the country's international "delegitimization" and isolation. He has sought to use this imbalance as leverage, seeking assurances from Israel on territorial contours before the talks even begin -- namely, a commitment to return to the pre-1967 borders. U.S. officials have been ensnared by this issue in the past; Israel resisted such commitments before the Annapolis talks of 2007 and the September 2010 talks in Washington.

HINTS OF PROGRESS

Despite these obstacles, low expectations have not doomed the Kerry mission. Neither Abbas nor Netanyahu wanted to be blamed if the mission failed, believing such an outcome would only complicate relations with Washington and, in Netanyahu's case, with parts of his own public. Abbas is aware that if he keeps spurning the Obama administration, the United States will likely move on to other crises, and the deadlock will continue. He also realizes that protracted stalemate is bound to push the populace toward Hamas radicalism, and his nonviolent approach will no longer be able to compete. For his part, Netanyahu defended the idea of peace with the Palestinians during a speech last week at the gravesite of the founder of Zionism, Theodor Herzl, stating, "We do not want a binational country."

As for the meetings with Kerry, a report by the Israeli daily *Maariv* indicates that Netanyahu expressed his willingness to seek security cabinet approval for preventing expansion of settlements beyond Israel's West Bank security barrier; he is even willing to make unspecified limitations on the settlement blocs adjacent to the pre-1967 boundaries. Approximately 80 percent of Israeli settlers are concentrated in blocs that constitute 5 percent of the West Bank, while the remaining 20 percent of settlers are dispersed in the other 95 percent of the land.

The *Maariv* article also claimed that Israel has agreed to release about 60 of the 123 prisoners convicted before the 1993 Oslo Accords. This issue is complex because many of these prisoners were arrested on murder charges. If they are released, the amnesty would occur in three phases, and only after talks begin. Netanyahu has said in the past that he does not want to set prisoners free before negotiations commence because he does not want "pay" for talking to the Palestinians. If the prisoners are released up front, he and other officials may be concerned that the Palestinians will have no incentive to continue the talks.

In exchange for these concessions, Netanyahu reportedly wants Abbas to drop his demand that Israel commit in advance to negotiations based on the pre-1967 borders and land swaps. According to *Maariv*, Abbas is willing to do so but would like all 123 prisoners delivered at once in order to make a bigger splash with the Palestinian public, especially since Israel released over 1,000 prisoners to Hamas in 2011 in return for hostage Gilad Shalit.

In short, if an agreement to enter final-status talks is reached, it would entail Israel compromising on settlements and prisoners, and Abbas dropping his territorial preconditions.

Kerry's visit has produced other interesting signs as well. For example, the Israeli Ministry of Defense suddenly announced this week that it would crack down on perpetrators of violence against innocent Palestinians. Meanwhile, Kerry left behind Jonathan Schwartz, a State Department legal advisor who has the best institutional memory in the U.S. government about Arab-Israeli negotiations and is usually dispatched when talks reach the agreement drafting

stage.

More broadly, Kerry views his current mission as a piece of a wider Israeli-Palestinian puzzle. In late May, for instance, Washington tasked Gen. John Allen -- U.S. Central Command's former number-two man on the Middle East -- with discussing Israeli security concerns as part of any final-status deal. Since then, he has reportedly held at least three rounds of meetings with the Israelis. Kerry also persuaded an Arab League delegation to renew their commitment to an Arab peace initiative; specifically, they discussed the prospect of Arab states normalizing their relations with Israel after it yields the West Bank, indicating that Israel could keep some settlements as long it offsets annexations with land swaps. Last but not least, Kerry declared a \$4 billion economic development program for the West Bank.

THE MISSION AND THE REGION

Kerry has pursued the Israeli-Palestinian issue not because he sees a peace deal as potentially transformative for the Middle East, but because he fears an outbreak of violence would have explosive resonance in a region already in turmoil. Israelis and Palestinians have various tactical reasons to understate the Kerry mission. Yet if reports are to be believed, he stands at least a chance for getting the parties to the table after years of deadlock, primarily by avoiding all-or-nothing principles and finding compromises. If a breakthrough fails to emerge, nobody can accuse Kerry of not prioritizing the issue.

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