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Daniel Kurtzer offers a valuable plan

By Rami G. Khouri

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Those who have followed the last eight months of American-mediated Israeli-Palestinian negotiations have anticipated the unveiling of the United States' own "framework" for continued talks to achieve a comprehensive peace agreement.

Whether or not this happens, for now the negotiations have hit a major snag and may well break down completely. The consequences of a breakdown would probably be grim for both sides. Israelis will feel increasingly besieged by their global political isolation, while the Palestinians will be further squeezed by Israel's chokehold on their economy, movement, borders, and energy, food and water sources.

I am disappointed that the Palestinians, Israelis and Americans have been unable to get beyond the old, failed Dennis Ross-style approach to diplomacy that saw U.S. mediators tilt heavily toward Israeli demands rather than prod both sides to seek mutually acceptable formulas based on equal rights.

Israelis and Palestinians one day will have to make the tough, historic decisions that were made by other leaders in other equally difficult conflicts, notably Northern Ireland and South Africa. There, conflicting sides achieved their core demands because they also accepted the core demands of the other.

Perhaps we will soon see both sides agreeing to keep negotiating on the basis of a U.S.-crafted "framework." If so, they would do well to study the recommendations recently made by a man who knows all sides of the conflict, and in fact has proposed adopting such a draft framework. He is the former U.S. diplomat Daniel Kurtzer, who served as ambassador to both Israel and Egypt. In recent years he has been a professor of Middle Eastern policy studies at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, where I am spending a few months as a visiting scholar and lecturer.

I went to see him in his office earlier this week to understand his approach in more depth. I came away impressed by a quality that is missing from the public pronouncements of U.S. officials: He seeks to sincerely acknowledge and respond to the most important needs on both sides, while also remaining within the bounds of what is politically feasible. It shows in Kurtzer's model framework text, which he says pushes both sides beyond their previously announced positions while "trying to accommodate their deepest interests and concerns."

Kurtzer outlines 12 key "parameters" for negotiation: goal, territory and borders, security, state-to-state relations, relations with neighbors, Israeli settlements, refugees, West Bank and Gaza "safe passage,"

places of historical and religious significance, Jerusalem, water and implementation.

He explained to me that “a framework is like the top of a funnel that is wider than the final accord that you reach in the detailed talks.” Some of his language is necessarily broad because the details can only be filled out by the two negotiating teams. Yet the framework should also give both sides the feeling that their key concerns and principles are being addressed, so that they would have an incentive to negotiate seriously – which does not seem to be the case these days.

I feel Kurtzer’s text is worth studying and developing further because it shows how serious negotiators could go about eliciting support and concessions from both sides who would both feel equally respected. For in its key words, phrases and diplomatic references, the text gives meaningful and simultaneous gains to Israelis and Palestinians alike.

Some of the language will be rejected in its current form. Examples of this are the relatively soft language on the rights of Palestinian refugees and the trauma of exile and of becoming refugees in 1947-1948; and the demand that Israel negotiate withdrawals from occupied territories based on the June 4, 1967, lines.

Areas such as these and a few others that are phrased in language that now seems unacceptable to one side or the other would have to be negotiated. That is precisely how a broad “framework” of contested words becomes a permanent peace agreement comprising mutually agreed terms and language.

Kurtzer’s suggestion for the new Israeli demand that Israel be recognized as a “Jewish state” is to have “Israel recognize Palestine as the national home of the Palestinian people and all its citizens, and Palestine will recognize Israel as the national home of the Jewish people and all its citizens.”

Jerusalem would become the capital of two states. It would remain undivided and free of permanent barriers, with agreed boundaries based on predominantly Jewish neighborhoods being part of Israel and predominantly Arab neighborhoods being part of Palestine. Both sides would agree on a special regime to administer the Old City under an international administrator whom they would appoint.

This is a very useful starting point for serious Israeli-Palestinian negotiations with a fair mediator. In my view, until now we have never had such a mediator.

Rami G. Khouri is published twice weekly by THE DAILY STAR. He can be followed on Twitter @RamiKhouri. The Kurtzer proposal can be accessed at:
http://wws.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/content/docs/Kurtzer_Parameters.pdf.