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### Does John Kerry's peace process have a chance?

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In the history of the world, nobody ever washed a rental car.

As the champagne corks pop at Foggy Bottom celebrating Secretary of State John Kerry's hard-earned success in launching Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, he'd be well advised to keep this piece of homespun philosophy in mind.

People really care only about what they own. And right now, Kerry has more ownership of this effort than Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, or U.S. President Barack Obama, for that matter.

It is an inconvenient truth. But having started this process, the United States will be on the hook for trying to finish it. If it's not prepared for that, the negotiations will fail. And the idea of a two-state solution will remain just that: an idea.

To reach this point, Kerry has combined his own relentless and willfulness (six trips to the region in four months) with something else: Neither Abbas nor Netanyahu wants to say no to America's top diplomat and take the blame for the collapse of the process. James Baker, one of Kerry's most successful predecessors, used this tactic effectively – threatening to leave a proverbial dead cat on Israel's and the Arabs' doorstep if they refused to attend the Madrid peace conference in 1991. Kerry's effort is also aided by the fact that both Abbas and Netanyahu worry that without a process of some kind, events on the ground could easily deteriorate.

These factors proved sufficient to get them back to negotiations, but more will be required to keep them there, let alone to reach an accord. Right now, neither has enough incentives, disincentives, and an urgent desire or need to move forward boldly. The gaps on both process and substance are wide, and the mistrust deep. Abbas wants a comprehensive effort to resolve all the core issues; Netanyahu knows his politics and ideology can't handle one and would prefer to go slow. If you took Kerry out of the picture, there would not even be talks about talks.

In fact, the process Kerry has launched is backwards. Unlike the Egyptian-Israel breakthrough that led to Anwar Sadat's historic visit to Jerusalem or the Israeli-Palestinian one in Oslo, some tough decisions were made by the parties themselves long before the United States got involved. Unfortunately, right now, the U.S. owns this one more than the parties do. And there's a good chance, given the gaps and mistrust on each side, that owning it themselves will

be much tougher than anyone imagined. It would be nice to assume that once involved in talks, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators will just sit down, work out the details themselves, and take the necessary steps on the ground that will create a better environment at the table. And bucked up by all kinds of bells and whistles – prisoner releases and economic aid for the Palestinians and security assistance and Arab state recognition for Israel – they'll somehow find one another and come to own the negotiating process.

But who are we kidding? This is the Arab-Israeli conflict. What can go wrong will go wrong. And because there's still very little traction right now in the talks, the U.S. will need to be all over them like a cheap suit. This is not an ideal situation. It would have been better had real urgency brought Mahmoud Abbas and Bibi Netanyahu together rather than John Kerry.

That doesn't mean Kerry is doomed to fail. But if he is to succeed, not only will the two sides have to own up, Kerry too will need to readjust his thinking and consider a more active strategy.

**Laying out parameters:** Right now, as far as we know, there are no agreed terms of reference governing the talks. If these negotiations were happening a decade ago, you might not need any, particularly if the process focused on interim issues. But this is a major-league peace process, dedicated to the end game. Without some kind of parameters to guide the talks – say, June 1967 borders with mutually agreed swaps or an agreement that Jerusalem will be the capital of two states – the negotiations will wander and likely break down.

**U.S. bridging proposals:** These, too, will be necessary. The two sides may well succeed in narrowing the gaps. But more than likely they will be unable to close them. It will take U.S. ideas and bridging proposals to move matters along. And these U.S. ideas must take into account the needs and requirements of both sides. The last time we tried this, at Camp David in July 2000, American proposals were much more to Israel's liking.

**The president's role:** Then there's Barack Obama, a risk-averse president whose priority isn't the Middle East but the American middle class. If a deal is to be done, it will have to entail a major role for Obama and a tough struggle with Abbas, but particularly with Netanyahu over issues such as borders and the final status of Jerusalem, where the American position is much closer to the Palestinians than to the Israelis. (On security and refugees, the Americans are closer to Israel). Will the president want to undermine his carefully calculated "reset" with Israel earlier this year for a risky bet on Middle East peace? Legacy pulls hard. But legacy cuts both ways: You can be the hero and the goat, too.

Is some kind of Israeli-Palestinian agreement possible? Perhaps. But it will take the kind of leadership, courage, and commitment that we haven't seen from any member of the Big Three – yet.

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