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The New Mideast Talks: Much Risk, Little Hope, but Still We Must Try

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WASHINGTON — THE success of Secretary of State John Kerry in leading Israelis and Palestinians to resume negotiations is presenting the United States with an immense challenge.

Right now, there's almost no chance of achieving a conflict-ending agreement; yet by pressing the Israelis and Palestinians back toward the table, the United States has assumed responsibility for producing one.

Above all, the Americans now need to lower expectations and find a realistic focus for the talks. That means pushing for an agreement on borders and security first, without precluding discussion of Jerusalem and refugees too.

Many have questioned why Mr. Kerry is focusing on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, while Syria is embroiled in civil war, Egypt is in political crisis, and Iran is moving to develop a nuclear weapons capacity. Negotiating this conflict first hardly seems the key to Middle East stability.

But the Israeli-Palestinian problem is a witches' brew and always dynamic. A conflict-ending accord may not be possible now, but without a credible negotiation to manage the situation, it will only deteriorate further.

For Israel, the absence of serious negotiations would increase its isolation and rule out hope for a solution that could secure its values as a democratic Jewish state. Palestinians would grow even more polarized and aggrieved; they would find ways to challenge the occupation, emboldening Hamas and other Islamists to attack Israel with increasingly powerful weapons.

And an unresolved Palestinian issue would over time undermine Egypt's and Jordan's treaties with Israel, regardless of whether Islamists or secularists hold power in Cairo and Amman. It would also continue to drag down our credibility in the Arab world.

Talking for talking's sake is not what I am proposing. That would make matters only worse. But a serious process toward achievable goals could build trust and reduce tensions.

Where to start? Mr. Kerry was right to focus on prisoner releases, like the one Israel announced over the

weekend. In addition, there might be agreements by the Israelis to effectively freeze new settlements and by the Palestinians to refrain from United Nations action or taking Israel to the International Criminal Court, along with an end of incitement to hatred in the Palestinian media. Those can buy time and political cover for both sides to identify larger shared interests to negotiate about, including enhancing Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation and allowing Palestinians to expand their economic projects in Area C of the West Bank, which is under Israel's control.

Instead of chasing the quixotic endgame of a deal on issues of identity like Jerusalem and refugees, the broad theme of the negotiations should be about the territorial ones — land and security. Specifically the focus should be on defining a border for a Palestinian state. Even under this narrower definition, success will be excruciatingly difficult.

Paradoxically, Mr. Kerry's personal success in getting negotiations going, and his stake in their success, now open him to the serious possibility of failure. The talks are starting in Washington, not in the region; he has designated himself the only spokesman for the very delicate start-up process, not the parties, and at least for now neither side is prepared to discuss publicly — or convey directly to each other — the parameters that will guide the negotiations. Nobody appears to have a stake in the talks except the United States, and Mr. Kerry.

Yet ownership is critical. Of the three historic breakthroughs in Arab-Israeli peacemaking, all were initiated by the parties themselves: secret Israeli-Egyptian contacts in 1977 preceded Anwar el-Sadat's trip to Jerusalem and offered Jimmy Carter a chance to broker an agreement; quiet negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, facilitated by Norway, produced the Oslo breakthrough in 1993; years of discreet contacts between Israel and Jordan led to their peace treaty in 1994. In each instance, the United States contributed — at times decisively — but only after the parties themselves had made very difficult choices.

There are three core challenges as the latest talks begin.

First, the endgame. A conflict-ending accord that resolves the core issues — borders, Jerusalem, security, refugees and recognition of Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people — and that also adjudicates all claims and forswears further ones seems almost unimaginable. The two sides don't yet share a common concept for reaching it.

Second, the current leaders. The Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, needs an agreement on all the big issues, while the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, could not sign one and survive politically.

The gaps between them are huge, the mistrust deep, the politics on both sides ferocious. The Palestinian public is wary of talks with Israel and reluctant to depart from its consensus stands on Jerusalem and refugees; further, Mr. Abbas's Fatah-led government shares control over guns, supporters and negotiating authority with the more militant Hamas. For his part, Mr. Netanyahu and his current government are not in full agreement about how to resolve final borders, Jerusalem and refugees in ways that meet Palestinian needs. Mr. Netanyahu's own ideology, suspicion of the Arabs and lack of belief in the Palestinian capacity to deliver would constrain him from offering concessions. He is focused on Iran, and the last thing he wants is a political crisis that would threaten his government.

Third, this is still very much Mr. Kerry's process. President Obama has yet to take ownership of it, and at some point, he will have to decide how much political capital he wants to spend on it. A deal on the big issues will not be possible without him playing a major role, perhaps at a high-risk summit meeting of leaders. And this will require him to press both sides for more give. Should Mr. Kerry bring matters to a decision point where key bridging proposals need to be advanced, there will have to be some distance between the American and Israeli positions, and Mr. Obama will have some tough choices to make.

Mr. Kerry is hoping that direct talks will build confidence and create enough trust for Israelis and Palestinians to feel that they have a stake in the process's succeeding when so many others have failed. Perhaps he can eventually get the two sides to define border and security arrangements for a provisional Palestinian state, discussing but not trying to decide the tougher identity issues like Jerusalem along the way.

The odds against success are very long. Still, Mr. Kerry has put down a bet worth making. Without it, matters will only get worse for the interests of Americans, the Middle East, Israelis and Palestinians alike.

Indeed, the only alternative to serious diplomacy now is a surrender to the forces of history and the despair, deterioration and protracted conflict they are certain to bring.

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