

COMMENTARY

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Enough Talking about Talks

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Secretary of State John Kerry is to be highly commended for his tireless efforts to persuade the Israelis and Palestinians to resume peace negotiations soon in Washington. Although the prospect of success of these negotiations is very slim, if there is any opportunity for a breakthrough, it will ultimately depend not only on major concessions both sides must make, but also on other critical elements, without which the prospect of success stands at zero.

I am not entirely sanguine that either the Palestinian Authority's President Mahmoud Abbas or Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu are ready, willing or able to make peace.

Netanyahu is an ideologue who does not really believe in a two-state solution, or at any rate, not one that would be established in most of the West Bank. From his perspective, Israel's historic and biblical claim to the entire "land of Israel," which includes the West Bank, is a given, if not divinely ordained, leaving little room for significant territorial compromises.

Conversely, Abbas is politically weak; his public support is limited and he is challenged by Hamas, which inhibits him from taking any step that would add to the prevailing perception of his weakness. At heart he wishes for peace, but his circumstances prevent him from taking the necessary bold steps required to reach an agreement.

Short of a change in Israeli and Palestinian leadership, if there is even small chance of forging peace with the current leaders, the US must take a number of critical steps concurrently with the peace negotiations once they resume.

Only by adopting these measures will it clearly demonstrate how serious Netanyahu and Abbas are about reaching an agreement while helping the US to determine early on the real prospect of achieving that goal.

These steps are critically important to engender public support from the start and help maintain the momentum, as the negotiations will inadvertently face a number of obstacles.

First, there exists profound distrust between the two sides which cannot be mitigated at the negotiating table. Israeli and Palestinian leaders must make every effort to change public perceptions about each other by simultaneously taking constructive measures to cultivate trust parallel to the negotiations on substantive issues.

All pronouncements by public officials must support the peace efforts and no longer portray each other as the eternal enemy. If Netanyahu and Abbas believe in a two-state solution, as they profess they do, they must portray it as the only viable outcome from the inevitability of coexistence.

The Palestinian leadership must openly advocate that the purpose of these negotiations is to bring an end only to the occupation of Palestinian land (the West Bank with some land swaps) which does not include any part of Israel.

The Israeli and Palestinian media can certainly play a pivotal role if they are regularly briefed by both sides about the progress in the negotiations, which can help generate increased public support.

Moreover, Israeli and Palestinian schools should change their attitude toward each other. The Palestinians, in particular, must demonstrably start modifying their textbooks to reflect Israel's existence.

Changing public perceptions must not be held prisoner to reaching an agreement first, because whether it happens now or later it remains indispensable to reaching a peace agreement. Actions on these fronts by Israelis and Palestinians must be visible and convincing in order to nurture trust. The Obama administration needs to insist that both sides engage in such public discourse and that failing to do so will only attest to their lack of commitment to reaching an agreement.

Second, Hamas must sooner than later be engaged in the negotiating process, initially through back channels by Western powers to seek some input from Hamas' leadership.

To be sure, unless Hamas' leadership feels that they have stakes in the negotiations, they will not hesitate to torpedo the whole negotiating process. Firing even a few rockets at Israel will cause some casualties and deliberately invite Israeli retaliation that could kill scores of Palestinians. Such a scenario could easily bring the negotiations to an immediate halt because neither side can continue with the negotiations as if nothing happened.

This is not to suggest that Hamas enjoys veto power to reject Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, but no keen observer can argue that a peace agreement between them is possible and can endure without Hamas' involvement.

Saudi Arabia and Egypt in particular are in a strong position to persuade Hamas to adopt the Arab Peace Initiative, which requires Hamas to abandon violence to resolve their conflict with Israel, and become legitimate partners in the negotiating process.

The US should encourage Abbas to reopen negotiations with Hamas' leaders to agree on general elections and subsequently form a government that represents the majority of the Palestinians.

Given their loss of Syrian support, their weakened position with the new Egyptian government, and the substantially reduced financial aid from Iran along with their diminishing popularity and the painful realization that Israel is here to stay, Hamas may well be inclined to cooperate at this juncture.

Third, enlisting key Arab states, in particular Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, not only to lend public support to the peace talks but also as observers, would provide political cover for Mahmoud Abbas to make significant concessions.

The right of return of the Palestinian refugees, for example, will be nearly impossible to resolve (as Israel resolutely rejects the return of any significant number of refugees) without explicit support of the key Arab states. Their presence will make such a concession appear as coming from the collective Arab body.

Moreover, considering the Iranian threats, most Arab states are eager to put the Israeli-Palestinian conflict behind as long as it meets key provisions of the Arab Peace Initiative.

Fourth, the US must insist on starting the negotiations with the most conflicting issue by focusing on borders first.

An agreement on borders would resolve 70-80 percent of the settlements problems, address Israel's major security concerns, and give the Palestinians every reason to believe that a Palestinian state is in the offing.

Finally, both Israelis and Palestinians must believe that the US is serious and committed to resolving the conflict. Neither side will take risks by making any major concessions unless they know the US is fully behind them.

The US must also be prepared to advance its own ideas and prepare to use its leverage—economic and political—to narrow the gap between them.

Finally, both Israelis and Palestinians must also believe that President Obama will use the power of his office to exact the needed concessions to reach an agreement by resorting to coercive measures if necessary.

The agreement to release dozens of long-held Palestinian prisoners—a most sensitive issue for the Palestinians—the appointment of Martin Indyk, a skilled and respected diplomat, and

insisting on continuing negotiations for at least six months, adds credibility and perceptibly improves the prospect of the US' efforts to mediate a peace agreement.

The idea of submitting any peace agreement to public referendums in Israel and Palestine is both necessary and desirable, especially if they pass with an impressive majority.

Israeli and Palestinian leaders can garner such a majority only if they demonstrate a resolute commitment to peace and create the environment from day one of the negotiations to that end.

Note: This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. **Web Link:** <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/enough-talking-about-talks/>

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