

5 Pitfalls in John Kerry's Middle East Peace Plan

While there most likely are more, here are at least five flaws in U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's Middle East peace plan:

1. No Palestinian reciprocity at the outset. Israel agreed to release 104 convicted terrorists just to get the Palestinians to talk peace. Would the U.S. agree to release 104 Guantanamo prisoners for talks with anyone?

Israel will undoubtedly be blamed if negotiations fail, so it's unlikely that fair judgment by the international community motivated the release. Perhaps it was the price Israel had to pay for a U.S. promise to prevent Iranian nukes and/or support Israel's efforts to stop them. If so, is the U.S. good for its word (despite Obama's repeated demonstrations that his Mideast "red lines" are meaningless)?

Whatever the explanation for Israel's good-faith opening, there were plenty of ways for the Palestinians to reciprocate: removing anti-Israel incitement from their textbooks and/or official media, recognizing Israel as a Jewish state, promising to "freeze" their anti-Israel diplomatic offensives, to name a few. But Secretary of State John Kerry preferred to establish that Palestinian reciprocity is optional: If Israel isn't volunteering what the Palestinians demand, they need only threaten to leave the talks and Kerry will compel the Israelis to comply.

2. No Palestinian good faith. The Palestinians will be represented by Saeb Erekat and Mohammad Shtayyeh. Shtayyeh's Facebook page displays a map of Israel's internationally recognized borders, plus the West Bank and Gaza—all emblazoned with the Arabic letters for "Palestine." So the person

entrusted with negotiating a two-state solution openly admits that his Mideast map has room for only a Palestinian state.

Just as alarming, during a recent sermon attended by Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas and broadcast on Palestinian television, Religious Endowments Minister Mahmoud al-Habbash compared the PA's decision to negotiate with Israel to the Prophet Muhammad's Treaty of Hudaibiya (in the year 628): "In less than two years, based on this treaty, the Prophet returned and conquered Mecca. This is the example. It is the model."

3. No religious freedom in a future Palestinian state. Palestinians insist (ironically) that "peaceful coexistence" means no Jewish settlers in their state. But, on principle, why should Jews be banned from living in a future Palestinian state—particularly when Muslims constitute over 17 percent of Israel's population? Will the future Palestinian state be as hostile to religious minorities as other Muslim majority states are?

Unfortunately, recent history gives little reason to hope otherwise. Khaled Abu Toameh, an award-winning Arab journalist, reported the following about a year ago:

"According to the Greek Orthodox Church in the Gaza Strip, at least five Christians have been kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam in recent weeks ... church leaders ... accused a prominent Hamas man of being behind the kidnapping and forced conversion of a Christian woman, Huda Abu Daoud, and her three daughters. Radical Islam, and not checkpoints or a security fence, remains the main threat to defenseless Christians not only in the Palestinians territories, but in the entire Middle East as well."

While Gaza is ruled by Islamists, the PA has also shown its hostility to Christians. On March 12, 2012, Algemeiner reported:

“A week after Prime Minister Salam Fayyad told an [international] audience of Evangelical Protestants ... that his government respected the rights of its Christian minorities, [PA] officials ... informed Bethlehem pastor Rev. Naim Khoury that his church lacked the authority to function as a religious institution under the PA ... There is a sense among Christians in Bethlehem that anti-Christian animus has gotten worse in the city ... Khoury said.”

A few weeks ago, Palestinians vandalized the Cave of the Patriarchs, Judaism's second holiest site. How safe will non-Muslim holy sites be if there is no more Israeli presence in the West Bank? Will a future peace agreement specifically guarantee protection of and Israeli access to Jewish holy sites?

If Israel's presence in the West Bank has helped moderate Muslim rule there, will Israel's complete departure mean West Bank Christians can expect their persecution to worsen to Gazan levels (with abductions and forced conversions)? Palestinian insistence that their future West Bank state be “*Judenrein*” doesn't bode well for the indigenous Christians there (or for religious freedom).

4. No Palestinian mandate to negotiate peace. There are about 2.1 million Palestinian Arabs in the West Bank and 1.7 million in the Gaza Strip. But Hamas-ruled Gaza vehemently opposes peace negotiations and denies Israel's right to exist. Islamic Jihad and Hamas recently lambasted PA leaders for meeting with Israelis to talk peace. The last time the PA announced direct talks with Israel, Hamas announced plans to launch terrorist attacks at Israel in coordination with 12 other Gaza terrorist organizations.

And it's not even clear that West Bank Palestinians favor these talks. Last Sunday, they rallied against peace until PA police violently suppressed the protest. Human Rights Watch has urged the Palestinian government to investigate the police

beatings.

At best, the PA can deliver only half of any peace it promises, which lets Palestinians have their cake and eat it too—the PA can extract painful territorial concessions from Israel at the negotiating table while Hamas can continue terrorist attacks to achieve the one-state solution embraced on Facebook by PA “peace negotiator” Mohammad Shtayyeh.

5. Transferring the West Bank could be Israel’s geostrategic undoing. Jordan could collapse any day from a flood of about 500,000 Syrian refugees (which grows daily); severe poverty; popular discontent over corruption, inequality, and lack of freedom; acute water shortages; and/or Muslim Brotherhood action to overthrow King Abdullah’s monarchy. These factors make the Abdullah regime’s survival increasingly uncertain.

After Israel militarily withdraws from the West Bank, will Hamas topple the PA there as it did in Gaza two years after Israel’s 2005 Gaza withdrawal? What if the Hamas-allied Muslim Brotherhood then takes over Jordan? If Jordanian-Palestinians—the largest ethnic group in Jordan—create a Palestinian state there (as advocated by this Jordanian-Palestinian writer), would Palestinians effectively have two states? The range and severity of threats to Israel from the combination of a post-Abdullah Jordan and a Palestinian West Bank state are considerable. Is it even possible to address these Israeli security concerns in a way that leaves Palestinian negotiators satisfied enough to sign a peace treaty?

With so many inherent defects in the current peace talks, why would the U.S. push its most reliable Mideast ally—and the only Middle East democracy—into such perilous waters or inevitable blame? One explanation is the increasingly fashionable idea (promoted by Arab governments) that settlements are blocking a peace deal that would produce Mideast stability. But inconvenient facts completely

contradict this idea: Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, Bahrain, and Yemen would remain the same conflict-torn mess they are now after any Israeli-Palestinian peace.

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