

Below The Surface Of The Middle East

Events, conflicts and wars in the Middle East have been the subject of analysis by media pundits, political analysts, academics and historians for decades. Yet many misconceptions and misinterpretations of events and developments in this region persist.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a perfect example of this situation. It has been reported on and analyzed ad nauseum. All the issues have been discussed, the arguments on both sides have been debated, attempts at resolving the conflict have been made, solutions have been offered and negotiated, even formal agreements have been signed. Yet it remains the longest unresolved conflict of the modern era.

Any person who is genuinely interested in understanding the intricacies of this unresolved conflict by listening, reading and researching publicly available information ultimately either remains baffled or locks in on an unshakable point of view consistent with their core values and/or their political orientation.

Why is this so? Simply put, it is because in the Middle East anything that happens is not what it seems and anything that is said is not what is meant. At any point in time the same rhetoric, the same arguments, the same historical facts have a different meaning. Behind this are different motivations that are anchored in the pragmatic ever-changing political and economical climate of the region rather than on what on the surface appears to be based on ideology, religion or political dogmas.

In order to understand the Middle East and most particularly the Israeli- Palestinian conflict one has to dig below the surface of reported “information”. One must understand the culture of the protagonists and the motivation that drives them to do what they do at any point in time. In many ways it is no different than any other major and seemingly insoluble conflict.

A good question to be asked, and many have, is why in the face of total turmoil and chaos in the region, specifically in Egypt, Syria and Iraq, were Israelis and Palestinians been “summoned” to the negotiation table through the relentless diplomatic efforts by John Kerry on behalf of United States?

From an above the surface analysis it defies all logic. In fact, many pundits declared that the timing and therefore the prospects for serious genuine negotiations could not have been worse. Yet this writer maintains that if one understands the below the surface currents in the region one must conclude that there has never been a better time and better odds to arrive at a negotiated peace solution based on the Kerry plan. How so?

Let's take a look at what motivates Israel to come to the table in search of a genuine peaceful solution. For Israel, the status quo is perfectly acceptable. No violence, no terrorism no serious sanctions, even with the BDS movement, a relatively stable economy, growing trade on a global basis and wealth accumulation by Israeli entrepreneurs. Israel's most serious challenges at this time are domestic issues of social justice, secular and religious divide, radicalism, fundamentalism and yes, even racism. These issues are the greatest threat to the well-being of the Israeli society today. The best way to focus on and resolve these critical domestic issues is under the circumstances of peace, where Israel can reduce its defence spending, direct funds and attention to these issues.

From a political point of view the timing (present coalition government) and conditions (as per Kerry's assurances) under which negotiations have resumed are most favourable to Israel. The Kerry plan calls for recognition of Israel as a Jewish state which removes one of the most serious obstacles to peace, namely the right of return of the Palestinians. By agreeing to the 1967 borders with swaps it resolves the issue related to the settlement blocks and minimizes any retreat from settlements in the West Bank to a manageable number of settlers and settlements. Just as importantly, a key difference is that this time a peace agreement is no longer only between Israel and the Palestinians. If successful, a peaceful solution will be backed up by the Arab League and its nation states who pledged the normalization of relationships with Israel. With the possibility of full diplomatic relations between Israel and the Arab states, a Kerry negotiated peace solution would spur economic and tourism activity and will boost not only the Israeli economy but also the economies within the region itself. It will finally allow Israel to come out from under the threat of elimination and emerge as a recognized Jewish democratic state by its sworn enemies. Those who criticize the release of the Palestinian terrorists who murdered innocent Israelis must understand that unfortunately this was the most reasonable compromise that Israel could make at this time as far as preconditions for the talks were concerned. Freezing of settlement activities would have been a far more significant compromise and politically de-stabilizing. Interestingly, the media and most of the pundits fail to mention the Kerry assurances given to the Israelis and the Palestinians because it is their job to ensure the appearance that they do not take sides in the negotiations. Instead they surface the traditional arguments and lower expectations on both sides to attract a wider audience on both the Left and the Right sides of the issues.

So what are the below the surface Israeli considerations for entering the negotiations? If the negotiations result in a final agreement under those conditions it will most certainly favour Israel. As well, for the first time, the political climate in Israel lends itself to a majority endorsement in a national referendum. Even the Bait Yehudi cannot block such endorsement as the Avoda will be more than willing to replace it in the Netanyahu coalition. As Meir Dagan once said, the absence of an Israeli consensus as to the vision of peace is the most serious obstacle to achieving peace with the Palestinians. It appears that such a majority, if not an absolute consensus, is emerging.

But what if the negotiations fail to produce an agreement? If so it would most likely be as a result of the Palestinians bringing to the table new or unreasonable demands such as the right of return of Palestinians to the Jewish state of Israel. While the media focus is on the “core issues” it should be noted that all of the core issues have been negotiated and agreed to before. This includes the most thorny issues such as Jerusalem, borders, land swaps and now recognition and right of return of Palestinians (e.g The Olmert Plan). If nevertheless the negotiations fail the pressure will be removed from Israel and moved over to the Palestinians. The U.S. will back up Israel and the world will have to come to the conclusion that the Palestinians and Abbas were disingenuous in their search for peace. This will further lessen the pressure on Israel with regards to its image in the world and further strengthen the alliance between the U.S. and Israel. But more importantly it will present a unique opportunity to secure its most strategic objective - secure a Jewish democratic state by unilaterally withdrawing from the West Bank to defensible borders and let the Palestinians figure out their future destiny. So it appears that below the surface no matter the outcome Israel is in a “no lose” situation entering the talks.

Many question why the United States is spending so much political capital in sponsoring the negotiation? Let’s examine the strategic interests of the U.S. in the region. The U.S. wants to solidify and maintain its political hegemony in the Middle East thus removing the potential of Russian, Chinese, Iranian or European influence in the region. The region is in turmoil and the U.S. is unable due to understandable circumstances to influence the outcome let alone intervene directly. Being engaged in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a demonstration of America’s leadership in the region. In so doing, it precludes the ability of others to intervene in Syria or Egypt. Success of the Israeli-Palestinian talks will be a major win for the United States especially with the assurances of the Arab League as “guarantors” of the peace with Israel. This will immediately neutralize Iranian influence in the region, marginalize if not paralyze Hamas and Hezbollah which indirectly may influence regime change in Syria.

The predicted timetable for the peace negotiations (nine months) affords the United States enough time to let the situation in Syria and Egypt sort itself out to a point where the U.S could either intervene or broker a solution that would result in the instalment of U.S friendly regimes in the region. Thus a peace deal between the Israelis and the Palestinians will make the United States the big winner in the Middle East. It would allow it to reduce its military footprint in the region and allow it to focus on its domestic issues of debts and deficits among many others. Israel will also be in the winning circle by neutralizing its detractors, nullify the BDS movement, the hostile Europeans and will put out of work the heretofore thriving delegitimization industry including the U.N, the anti-Israel NGO’s and various “Human Rights” organizations.

A question remains as to why would the Palestinians (e.g., Fatah) want to come to the table right now and agree to the conditions and assurances of the Kerry letters?

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has always been the major issue in the Arab world vis-à-vis its relation with the U.S. It was blamed for every failure in the Arab countries and justified any shortcoming of the regimes. However now the Arab countries are wrestling with far greater challenges such as the Syrian civil war, chaos in Egypt, sectarian conflicts, failing economies, internal and external challenges to the U.S friendly Saudi and Jordanian regime and extreme sectarian violence in Iraq. The Palestinians realize that their struggle for nationhood may now take a back seat to these more pressing regional issues and conflicts. They are concerned that the window is going to close on their aspirations for an independent sovereign Palestinian state. Furthermore, by negotiating a peace deal with Israel the Fatah/PLO leadership in the West Bank will have delivered to the Palestinians people from a political, economical, emotional, religious perspectives what Hamas could not deliver in the Gaza strip. It will therefore marginalize Hamas and the Fatah regime will have a serious chance to extend the peace dividends to Gaza in a democratic elections with the endorsement of the entire Arab world. The Palestinians also understand that if they arrived at the peaceful solution with Israel under the United States' watch they will benefit economically and politically from the U.S, and will be able to fend off any present threats from its neighbours Jordan or Syria who are also likely to fall into or under the influence of United States. Finally, and maybe most importantly, the Palestinians understand that they stand to gain economically by creating a peaceful relationship with Israel; one that allows for trade, labour and commerce movement; one that would lift their economy and the standard of living of the Palestinian people which may not be possible if the situation in Egypt and/or Syria turns out the "wrong way". Having an independent sovereign Palestinian State that the Palestinians now understand they cannot achieve through unilateral (UN, ICC) measures or through any other pressure on Israel for concessions beyond the Kerry assurances comes at an opportune time. In fact, they may well be able to offer the Palestinian diaspora a right of return to a Palestinian homeland as did the Israelis in 1948. They will get East Jerusalem to become their capital, monumental achievements that are made possible right now because of the convergence of strategic interests of both Israel and the United States as already described.

If however the extreme elements within the Fatah or pressure from Hamas cause the negotiations to fail the Palestinians will find enough reasons to share with their people and blame Israel and United States for their failure. As a consequence, they will be faced with a continued expansion of Israeli settlements. Israel and the United States will have an easy task to brand the Palestinians as the obstructionist and justify maintaining the status quo which is where we started our analysis. The majority of Israelis will accept the status quo for as long as there is no violence, war or external threats to its existence. The Palestinians position on the other hand will be weakened internally and vis-a-vis the Hamas and their destiny will be determined by other developments that are not within their control.

Therefore it would appear that it is clearly in the interest of all three parties to the negotiations both the United States as the broker as well as Israel and the Palestinians to arrive at or at the

very least make substantial progress toward a peaceful solution whilst the rest of the Middle East is boiling over. In particular, the Palestinians stand to gain a de facto solution rather than be subject to future events that can only become more volatile. In this scenario the United States maintains its hegemony in the Middle East while at the same time minimizing its military footprint in the Middle East. This will allow the U.S. to relegate the maintenance of the peace to the Arab nations in the region and focus on its domestic issues of debt and deficits fiscal and social reforms and political gridlock.

The skeptics may well ask what would happen if peace breaks down? What if weapons flow into the state of Palestine and rockets fall on Tel-Aviv and Hamas and Hezbollah join the party? Israel, under such circumstances, will be perfectly justified and is fully capable to retaliate in kind having been attacked by another sovereign nation without having to sustain the wrath of the international community. In the peace scenario the U.S. is reinstated as the hegemonic power in the region, the Arab states maintain peace and normalize relations with Israel, the realization of the Palestinian nationhood aspiration and Israel's status as a Jewish state. Could Iran upset the apple cart in that scenario? Not likely. Iran will be marginalized, its economy in tatters and no one including the Russians or Chinese will jump to their rescue. Could Hamas alone upset the apple cart? Not likely. Israel will quickly recapture Gaza and turn it over to the state of Palestine to rule.

So there you have it. What may appear on the surface to be the worst timing for beginning yet another round of peace negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians may actually be the most opportune timing when one considers the "below the surface" issues. While none of the parties will achieve 100% of what they hoped for, entering into a peace accord now will likely meet each party's core strategic objectives and allow the Israelis and the Palestinians to deliver to their constituencies the illusive promise peace and all of its dividends. Opportunities like this do not come often in the Middle East where the stars are aligned to achieve the seemingly impossible. Meir Dagan once told me in response to the obvious question: "Not in your life time". This time I hope and pray that he was wrong.