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# World Citizen: For Israel-Palestine, a Weak Peace Process is Better Than None

By Frida Ghitis

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From the start of John Kerry's push for a peace deal between Israelis and Palestinians, nobody except the secretary of state held very high hopes for success. Kerry [declared confidently](#) he expected a comprehensive deal, a "final status agreement over the course of the next nine months." Everyone else responded to his optimism with little more than a benign smile.

Eight months later, what the parties have reached instead of an agreement is a deep impasse. The inevitable question arises: What's next?

The nine-month period concludes at the end of April, and negotiations have produced what seemed almost impossible: a puncturing of Kerry's optimism. After thousands of miles of trans-Atlantic flights and hundreds of hours spent on the mission during a time of turmoil in other global hotspots, Kerry gave a press conference last week in Morocco in which he [admitted things were not going well](#). It's time, he said, for a "reality check."

At the time Kerry launched his mission, I was in the Middle East. The topic of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks came up frequently. My conversations with Arabs and Israelis showed the same paradox that opinion polls have confirmed repeatedly: Almost no one expected the talks to succeed, but people on both sides were very supportive of at least trying. There was one person, however, who sounded almost alarmed at the implications of starting a process all but assured to end in failure. Raising expectations, he told me, would lead to a disaster when the talks came to naught.

It's easy to see a collapse of the peace talks proving disastrous for both sides. And for precisely that reason, the moribund peace process may just survive. The chances that Israelis and Palestinians will make a deal that ends their conflict at this particular time are close to zero. But they, and the U.S., have more to lose than to gain by bringing the talks to a definitive end.

It was not surprising to see last week, as the congeniality of diplomacy unraveled, Israelis and Palestinians [appealing to the U.S. to continue its efforts](#).

With a couple of weeks to go, what we may be seeing from all sides—Palestinians, Israelis and Americans—is a brand of brinksmanship that is not exactly bluff. Everyone is trying to pressure everyone else by walking away. That is true of Washington just as it is of Israelis and Palestinians. Israel refused to release a group of Palestinian prisoners, which it had promised to do, unless Palestinians agreed to extend the talks. And Palestinians responded by launching a push to join international organizations, a break with its vow not to move unilaterally.

These maneuvers may gather momentum of their own and could end the talks. But a more likely outcome is that the peace process will continue, probably in a different form and with even lower expectations, as a way to keep the situation from deteriorating. Prolonged talks would protect the interests of the three parties involved in hopes that at a future date, when the political landscape changes, true progress can be made.

For now, neither Israelis nor Palestinian leaders are prepared to endorse all the politically costly positions needed to resolve the conflict.

Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian Authority president, governs only the West Bank, while his rivals in Hamas rule Gaza. Abbas is in his 10th year of a term of office that expired more than five years ago. He and his Fatah party operate under the constant threat that their more extremist rivals will topple them. The aging Abbas is simply not about to tell the Palestinian people, for example, that they must compromise on the so-called right of return, their demand that all the refugees and their descendants be allowed to move to Israel when a Palestinian state is established.

In Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu leads a coalition whose right-wing members have threatened to bring him down if he agrees to certain Palestinian demands, among them the future of Jerusalem.

The shorthand for the situation is that the minimum demands of each side are greater than the maximum willingness to compromise by the other.

And yet, the currently insurmountable gaps do not mean that ending the talks is the best solution.

If peace talks are declared dead, Hamas and other groups that reject compromise with Israel will have their told-you-so moment. Abbas' *raison d'être* has been to offer an alternative to violence as a path to statehood. Walking away now would concede defeat. It could also unleash an epidemic of violence that would prove devastating for Palestinians and Israelis.

For Israel, and for Netanyahu, an end to the talks could produce a series of disastrous consequences. Israel's international isolation would grow. Relations with the U.S. would deteriorate. And nobody in Israel yearns for a return to violence, much less an upsurge in political power in the Palestinian areas by the likes of Hamas and Iran.

Even Washington has much to lose if the talks come to a full stop.

An end to the talks would count as a defeat for Kerry. President Barack Obama has kept his distance, allowing the secretary of state to brand the latest round as his. Still, if Washington moves away from the peace process, Obama will be seen as giving up on an important agenda item. In fact, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is still seen by some people as the most important problem in the Middle East, despite the proliferation of many other unrelated crises in the region.

It would put a black mark [on Obama's Mideast policy](#), an area where successes are hard to find.

Obama will want to be seen as "working for peace" between Israelis and Palestinians. And it will be more than a slogan. The last thing Obama wants is yet another armed conflict in the region.

What should count as the most important reason not to give up on peace is that majorities of both Israelis and Palestinians want a two-state solution. They may feel less warmly toward the compromises that will require, but most want a diplomatic solution. And they know a certain level of involvement by Washington is indispensable for reaching the finish line.

In the end, the chances are that the U.S. will take a step back, but will not walk away. And the process will continue, with all sides trying to hold on until there's a chance for a breakthrough. □

*Frida Ghitis is an independent commentator on world affairs and a World Politics Review contributing editor. Her weekly WPR column, [World Citizen](#), appears every Thursday.*

*U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry addresses the staff and families at the U.S. Consulate General in Jerusalem, Apr. 8, 2013 (U.S. State Department photo).*

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