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Kerry's Misreading of Reality

by Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaakov Amidror

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In his speech bidding farewell to active diplomatic activity in the Middle East, US Secretary of State John Kerry addressed only one topic: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and specifically settlements. In so doing, he displayed his inability to assess the region correctly and to put the Palestinian issue into perspective. Many around the world scarcely distinguish between settlements and Israel in general, and the fight against Israel reflects a burgeoning hatred of Jews. Consequently, Kerry's address is bound to serve the enemies of Israel and could contribute to the strengthening of anti-Semitism.

John Kerry has always believed the key to a better future for the Middle East lies in peace between Israel and the Palestinians. The number of such believers has shrunk considerably in light of recent regional upheavals, but there are those who remain obsessed with the issue. Kerry's speech last week criticizing the settlement enterprise suggests that he is still one of them.

Kerry is obviously familiar with what is currently transpiring in the Middle East. He knows no Arab state is absolutely stable, even if upheaval has yet to befall it. He knows there is no way to strike peace between Sunnis and Shiites. He knows radical Islamist groups are thriving in the region, threatening the fabric of life in the moderate Sunni states from within. He knows that in the Middle East, the soil is drenched with blood.

Kerry must also be aware that Iran is gaining a greater foothold in the region, thanks to both the 2015 nuclear deal and Tehran's alliance with Moscow, which is now the only superpower in the region. Excluding the air campaign against IS, the US has become less relevant when it comes to the wars waged

in the Middle East (at least for now). Yet Kerry, in his last speech on Middle East policymaking, chose to focus only on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is a clear sign of his inability to gauge the issue's place in the regional equation, and is too big a distortion to be put down to random error.

Kerry's offense does not lie with what he said, but with what he did not say, and what those unsaid words implied. The obsessive preoccupation with settlements could be justified had it been put in the right context, or had Kerry explained how the Palestinians' conduct has contributed to the crippling of negotiations and the loss of confidence in the peace process as a whole.

Kerry failed to mention how the Palestinian Authority's support of terrorists' families leads to bloodshed. He did not demand Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to cease this practice, even though Israelis see it as highly damaging to the negotiations' credibility. He failed to condemn Palestinian incitement as strongly as he denounced Israeli settlement construction, and was not as adamant in his demand to cease the former as he was about placing a moratorium on the latter – even though Abbas could easily put a stop to Palestinian incitement, which would reduce the number of terrorist attacks.

To hear Kerry describe things, the Palestinians and the world could reasonably conclude that as far as the US is concerned, only one problem exists: the settlement enterprise, which is blamed exclusively for the collapsed efforts to reignite the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. Kerry failed to mention, however, that in 2010, Israel placed a 10-month moratorium on all settlement construction because Washington promised that Abbas would resume negotiations. He did not. Nor did Kerry mention that he personally negotiated a deal by which Israel would release vile murderers and Abbas would resume negotiations. Again, he did not. Kerry further failed to mention that Abbas, after meeting with US President Barack Obama in 2014, refused a proposed American framework to reignite peace talks – one to which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu agreed. That was a critical test of "yes" or "no," one Netanyahu passed and Abbas failed.

For these reasons, even if everything Kerry said in his speech was true, that truth is still only a partial representation of reality – and as we all know, half-truths are far worse than whole lies. This is why Britain and Australia, two nations that oppose Israeli settlement-building in Judea and Samaria, came out against the speech, stating that the settlements "are far from the only problem" hindering the peace process. London and Canberra seem to understand something Kerry does not: when one loses proportion and presents half-truths, one inflicts harm, even if one's facts are correct.

The more profound issue stemming from Kerry's speech, and from the Obama administration's decision not to veto the UNSC's December 23 resolution condemning the settlement enterprise, stretches beyond their immediate impact. The UNSC resolution is not legally binding, and the outgoing Secretary's speech bears no diplomatic weight. But both have moral significance.

Israel is waging a battle against a well-organized, well-funded delegitimization campaign, and incidents such as these make that battle much more difficult. They make it easier for Israel's detractors to claim that Israel's actions are solely to blame for the stalled negotiations. They could also make it easier for sanctions to be imposed – first on settlement products, and ultimately on products of the State of Israel.

Kerry's words will serve those who hate Israel and may indirectly boost anti-Semitism worldwide. For many, little separates Israel and the settlement enterprise, and even less separates the struggle against Israeli policies from Jew-hatred. At times, the former seeks no more than to disguise the latter.

At the end of the day, the UNSC's resolution and Kerry's speech were self-defeating for Obama and Kerry. Assuming their goal was to prompt Israel and the Palestinians to resume talks, their actions have only pushed that day farther away.

These events have created a need in Israel to formulate "a proper response" to the outgoing administration's moves, to prove Israel is a sovereign state that yields to no one. This could spell an acceleration of settlement construction or the annexation of parts of Area C, which would only inflame the situation on the ground and fuel the Palestinians' sense that there is no partner in negotiations.

The Palestinian Authority, for its part, will see the resolution and Kerry's speech as reasons not to resume negotiations at all, as that would entail concessions on their part. After all, reality has proven that their international standing can improve regardless of negotiations or concessions. None of Kerry's predecessors, for example, ever spoke openly about a Palestinian capital in Jerusalem.

Anger and obsession are poor foundations for the making of important decisions, as demonstrated by Kerry's speech and the US abstention at the UNSC. Israel should refrain from making the same mistake.

Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaakov Amidror is the Anne and Greg Rosshandler Senior Fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He is also a distinguished fellow at JINSA's Gemunder Center for Defense and Strategy.

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