

The war that Kerry and Indyk began

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One year ago, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, former Ambassador Martin Indyk and, in the background, President Barack Obama, set out on the latest quest to bring peace to the Israelis and Palestinians. Like so many others (including the architects of Oslo Accords 20 years ago), they failed. And now, even if the cease-fire between Israel and Hamas finally holds, the Americans will get no credit.

Learning nothing from history, the would-be peace brokers forgot that the first rule for peace-makers, inspired by the Hippocratic Oath for doctors, is "first, do no harm." Instead, as a result of their arrogance and ineptness, millions of Israelis are being targeted in waves of missile barrages, while Palestinians in Gaza are hit in counterattacks against the concrete bunkers where the weapons are stored, below houses, schools and mosques.

Looking back to July 2013, relations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority were about as good as they ever get. Hamas was isolated, and limited to a few sporadic rocket attacks. On the West Bank, despite conflict over settlements and Palestinian incitement, cooperation was quietly growing, with the emphasis on constructive economic development. While most of the Middle East was in the midst of major turmoil and instability, including Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya and Egypt, Israeli-Palestinian relations were notably calm.

But Kerry and Indyk could not leave well enough alone -- whether due to their own egos or a total misunderstanding of Middle East realities, they orchestrated and imposed yet another misguided "peace process." The Palestinians demanded Israeli "gestures" and "confidence building measures" as the price for participation, and under American pressure, Netanyahu agreed, in the form of releasing another group of Palestinian terrorists from Israeli jails. The alternative, to freeze construction over the Green Line, was strategically and politically unacceptable.

When, after seven months, the negotiations reached the predictable impasse, and it was clear that the confidence building moved in only one direction, Israel stopped further releases. Palestinian prisoners began a hunger strike as part of an international campaign to pressure Israel. This campaign was pursued in coordination with a network of pro-Palestinian nongovernmental organizations claiming to promote human rights, and largely funded by the European Union and individual governments. But Israel withstood this pressure.

Following the failure of the diplomatic strategy, via Kerry and Indyk, to free more terrorist "heroes," Hamas seized the opportunity to act, and after aborted attempts, succeeded in kidnapping and killing Gil-ad Shaer, Eyal Yifrach and Naftali Frenkel. Brutality led to brutality, with the kidnapping and murder of Muhammed Abu Khdeir.

The bloodshed then spiraled quickly, as Hamas and its allies expanded the violence by launching massive rocket attacks targeting Israeli cities. Instead of peace, Israelis and Palestinians were back in another round of brutal violence. The relative stability and quiet of a year earlier, that distinguished this corner of the Middle East from the insane mass carnage in Syria and Iraq, was totally erased.

Indyk has been dismissed, but continues to give interviews in which he spins his version of events, blaming others while conveniently omitting his central role in the debacle. Obama and Kerry are busy with other issues -- including what appears to be another negotiation failure with Iran -- and when Abbas and the Hamas leadership formed a unity government, the Americans yawned, using the excuse that since no visible Hamas members were named as members of the government, nothing important had changed, and the massive U.S. aid would continue.

After the latest war began, Kerry did make a brief attempt to mediate, announcing that he was going to Cairo, but almost immediately turned around. When the cease-fire finally takes hold, it will not be due to any contribution from Washington, which has shown a consistent lack of credibility in all issues related to peace making and negotiation.

As in the previous Arab-Israeli wars, there are many lessons to be learned, although it appears that the eager peacemakers are unable to see them. If, in contrast to Indyk and Kerry, there are diplomats capable of learning from history, the most important point is to recognize the huge cost of failure. Like doctors, who deal with life and death on an individual level, political leaders who deal with fates of nations must be bound by the terms of the Hippocratic Oath: "First, do no harm."

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