

Kushner 8-23-2017

Bad timing

The timing for this trip couldn't be worse. It may be that the recent terror and violence at Haram al-Sharif/the Temple Mount -- in which the United States played a minimal role -- has accelerated the administration's timetable and its desire to try to get something going before violence breaks out again. But right now there is not a shred of evidence to suggest that either Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas or Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is in the mood to compromise on the substance of the negotiations or the process itself.

Talk of scandal and indictment is swirling around Netanyahu and is pushing him to circle the wagons and reach out to his right -- never a good omen for peace.

And Abbas is viewed as weak: fighting rear-guard actions against Hamas and his Fatah rivals as well as key Arab states. He is also threatening to internationalize his approach to the peace process rather than enter into talks with Israel.

Indeed, he's reportedly going to present Kushner with an ultimatum that unless progress is made within 45 days, the Palestinian Authority will turn away from the United States as a broker.

No plan

If you don't know where you're going, the old saying goes, any road will get you there.

This will be Kushner's third trip to the region, and the administration has still not decided on a framework or an end state for negotiations.

Indeed, Trump has neither endorsed nor rejected the two-state solution -- the mainstay of his three predecessors' approach to the peace process.

In a recent off-the-record briefing, Kushner admitted the challenges in identifying an end game and wondered what -- new or unique -- he and the administration were bringing to the problem.

One-state solution explained 00:52

No matter who had won the 2016 US election, getting to a two-state solution would have been a real stretch. So is the Trump administration considering another option? And what ideas might Kushner be bringing to the region on this visit?

Is he going to propose a bottom-up approach of interim steps: economic cooperation, turning over more responsibility to Palestinians in parts of the West Bank, and deepening now fraught Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation?

Or will he propose a top-down policy? One that develops a framework on the big issues, such as borders and Jerusalem that the two sides will negotiate with US help?

Whichever direction Kushner and the administration decide to take, they need to make their plans known soon.

The Kushner trip might actually be considered something of a success if the United States managed to identify an approach that Abbas and Netanyahu didn't blow out of the water immediately.

An Arab fantasy

The new ingredient in this administration's attempts to bring peace to the region is the willingness of Arab states to work with Israel -- Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in particular.

And it's no coincidence that the Kushner mission began with a swing through the Gulf, Egypt and Jordan.

Given the Trump administration's penchant for huge events, it wouldn't surprise me if it was aiming to produce some kind of peace conference as a way to jump-start the process. One Arab analyst speculated -- somewhat fantastically -- that the Saudis might host such a happening in Jeddah.

How much the Arab states will give, however, is going to depend on how forthcoming the Israelis will be vis-à-vis the Palestinians and whether the Trump administration will support Palestinian goals, particularly on statehood.

Indeed, it's magical thinking to believe that if the United States wants the Arabs involved in a meaningful way, either Jerusalem or Washington (most likely both) won't have to pay for it.

Credibility on the line

In 20 years of working on the peace process, I wish I had a nickel for every unproductive trip we took to try to start or save negotiations.

Persistence is critical. But so is keeping your powder dry when it's clear that the parties really aren't all that interested in helping out a US envoy. And as part of the President's family, Kushner is no ordinary envoy.

Moreover, he's traveling with deputy national security adviser Dina Powell, the immensely talented, Egyptian-born fluent Arabic speaker who will provide real substance, heft and hopefully some much-needed reality.

Abbas: With Trump's wisdom, peace is possible

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Still, another trip or two without producing a visible sign of progress -- let alone a direction or concept that the Arabs and Israelis can embrace -- will erode what remains of Kushner's credibility on this issue. And the parties will grow accustomed to his visits and weary of his talking points. And while they may humor him because of his closeness to the President, they won't take him seriously.

Had Trump not come out of the gate pushing big breakthroughs and ultimate deals, he might not have put his and US credibility so publicly on the line. No one looking at Abbas and Netanyahu realistically would ever have believed that they -- even with US help -- could produce a final peace agreement on the big issues.

And the President's political travails at home, particularly the self-inflicted wounds in the wake of the violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, have raised serious questions about Trump's capacity and focus to deliver on the peace process -- or any other issue.

Right now the emperor has no clothes. And where Kushner and his team will find them is anybody's guess.