

# Talks Begin on Mideast, to Doubts on All Sides

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For all of the intricacies of issues like the shape of future borders, security arrangements and the status of Jerusalem, the Middle East peace talks that resumed Monday night are dominated by two simple questions: If it took Secretary of State John Kerry countless phone calls and six trips to the Middle East just to get Israeli and Palestinian officials to the negotiating table, how will it be possible to achieve a comprehensive peace agreement? And what will happen if his herculean negotiating efforts fall short?

In a brief appearance at the State Department on Monday, Mr. Kerry said his goal was to pursue “reasonable compromises” of some of the Middle East’s most intractable issues.

“I know the negotiations are going to be tough, but I also know that the consequences of not trying could be worse,” he said.

In making the revival of the Middle East talks his top priority, Mr. Kerry is not only challenging the status quo in the region but also taking on the conventional wisdom in much of the American foreign policy establishment.

The prevailing narrative among the pundits, including more than a few experienced Middle East hands, is that while the Israelis and Palestinians may have sent their negotiators to Washington to placate Mr. Kerry, neither side appears remotely prepared to make the hard calls needed to cement a lasting peace.

Some experts argue that it may be risky even to try.

“The existence of talks can have a calming effect while they continue, and if they continue for several months can get us through the U.N. General Assembly without bitter Israeli-Palestinian confrontations,” said Elliott Abrams, who was a senior official on President George W. Bush’s National Security Council.

“But I see no realistic possibility that a final status agreement can be reached now,” Mr. Abrams said. “I just hope there are two State Department teams: one to work on the talks, and the other to start planning for what to do when they fail. We should not only try to avoid a crash landing, but see if the talks can be used to advance Israeli-Palestinian economic and security cooperation.”

In recent weeks, Mr. Kerry and his aides have outlined several basic arguments for why his efforts might bear fruit. Perhaps the most important one, which Mr. Kerry advanced almost the moment he was picked for the State Department post, is that the United States does not have the luxury of staying on the sidelines.

With the Palestinians poised to take their claim for statehood to the International Criminal Court and United Nations bodies, American officials say the two sides were facing a downward spiral in which the Israelis would respond by cutting off financing to the Palestinian territories and European nations might curtail their investment in Israel, further isolating the Israelis.

Another argument Mr. Kerry has used is that diplomatic progress would foster as much as \$4 billion in private sector investment in the Palestinian economy, a portion of which would take effect in the near term.

He has also reasoned that he can make headway by taking a new look at Israel’s security requirements and the arrangements to safeguard them. John R. Allen, the retired general who used to lead the Afghan campaign, has been working to define what those requirements would be in any West Bank territory that is handed back to the Palestinians.

Mr. Kerry extracted a commitment that the two sides would give the talks at least nine months, which provides some time to explore ideas without fears of a walkout.

One argument that Mr. Kerry and his team have been careful not to make publicly, but that Arab, Israeli and American officials have begun to speculate about, is that something less than a comprehensive settlement might be achievable.

A guiding principle of final status talks so far — the Camp David summit meeting and Taba talks in 2000 and 2001, the Annapolis process from 2007 to 2008, and the brief round of discussions in 2010 between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel and President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority — has been that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed upon, that any deal reached must mean the end of the conflict and the end of claims by either side.

Many experts now say this guiding principle ought to be changed, given the deep lack of trust between the two sides, the political constraints both are under and the substantive gaps in their positions.

“They have got to get rid of this mantra,” said Yossi Alpher, a strategic analyst who has been involved in the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue for years. “If nothing is agreed until everything is agreed,” he said, “they will agree on nothing.”

Mr. Alpher said that experience has shown it is easier to narrow the gaps on practical, post-1967 issues like borders, settlements, security and sovereignty than on issues that cut to the core narratives of each side, like the Palestinian demand for the right of return for refugees of the 1948 war and their descendants and control over holy places in hotly contested areas of Jerusalem.

While the talks are initially expected to focus on procedural issues, like the location, schedule and format of negotiating sessions, they are already beginning to take on a last-ditch quality.

One area Mr. Kerry and his critics appear to agree on is that having

made Middle East peacemaking his top priority, the secretary of state has raised the stakes so much that if this effort collapses, it will be a long time before anybody tries again.

“Many people will conclude that there is no chance for a two-state solution,” said Michael Herzog, an Israeli fellow of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. “That could be very dangerous.” Mr. Herzog, a retired brigadier general who has participated in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process since 1993, said the fact that the sides were going into the negotiations without agreed-upon parameters indicated that it was going to be an “uphill struggle.”

He added, “I, like many others, am skeptical, but I do believe it is very important that we try.”

Hussein Agha, a senior associate member of St. Antony’s College at Oxford University, said that one reason to hope this time might be different is that “there are two leaders who find themselves in a unique position.”

Mr. Abbas, he said, is “the last Palestinian national leader who will be able to weave together the totality of the Palestinian people.” On the Israeli side, Mr. Agha said, Mr. Netanyahu is uniquely placed to be able to bring along constituencies from the right-of-center, the center and the left to support a deal.

“One thing is clear to me,” Mr. Agha said. “If it is not done now, it will not be done for a long, long time.”