

White House Signals Pause in Mideast Talks

President to Discuss Next Moves When Secretary of State Returns

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The Obama administration threatened to pull back from talks and its envoy said it was "reality check time" on his centerpiece foreign policy initiative, as the Middle East peace process was near collapse.

Mr. Obama will discuss next steps in the process when Secretary of State [John Kerry](#) returns to Washington from a trip abroad during which he was forced to cancel a stop in the Middle East.

The U.S. on Friday began a painful re-evaluation after 15 months in pursuit of a deal whose failure, American officials said, would risk fueling violent Palestinian actions against Israeli occupation and renewed calls in Europe for an economic boycott on Israel.

Secretary of State John Kerry, after making Mideast peace a personal priority, threw his message into reverse, telling both sides "he's willing to walk away," a senior administration official said.

Nonetheless, Israelis and Palestinians took entrenched positions, further imperiling increasingly unlikely peace prospects.

In Israel, moderate members of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's cabinet called Friday for the cessation of any negotiations with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, with one saying his demands on Israelis were a "premeditated provocation meant to blow up the talks."

Among Palestinians, lead negotiator Saeb Erekat recommended his government unify with militant groups Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad—designated as terrorist organizations by the U.S.—to govern the Gaza Strip.

Many U.S. and Israeli officials dismissed Mr. Erekat's threat as bluster. Arab officials said it underscored the growing alienation of the Palestinian leadership from the American-led mediation and elevated prospects of instability in the Mideast.

"We believe that the two-state solution has ended and the only solution is a bi-national state," said Tawfiq Tirawi, a member of the Central Committee of Mr. Abbas's ruling Fatah Party. "The U.S. and Israel are bearing responsibility for this failure."

The comments by the U.S. and the actions of Israelis and Palestinians posed the dimmest view in months on the Mideast peace process.

On Friday, both Mr. Kerry and the White House expressed fatigue with both the Israeli and Palestinians and said the U.S. was limited in the time it could devote to trying to bring peace, particularly with the growing national security threats posed by Russia's military moves against Ukraine, the Syrian civil war, and Iran's nuclear program.

"There are limits to the amount of time and effort that the United States can spend if the parties themselves are unwilling to take constructive steps in order to be able to move forward," Mr. Kerry told reporters in Rabat, Morocco.

Mr. Kerry, who has been on a two-week overseas trip focused on the Mideast and Russia, announced he was returning to Washington to confer with President Barack Obama on the future of U.S. involvement in the peace process.

Despite the pessimism, the Obama administration's ability to pull back may have limits, current and former American officials said Friday.

Mr. Kerry has repeatedly stated his fear that without talks, unrest could quickly spread through Palestinian territories, and international isolation of Israel could grow. Mr. Kerry has warned in recent months of European threats to economically boycott Israel if the peace process fails.

A collapse in the peace process could further undercut Mr. Obama's foreign policy legacy, former U.S. diplomats have said, a record hurt by Washington's failure to stop the bloodletting in Syria and Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#)'s recent move to annex the Crimean region of Ukraine.

"Today, if you look at the international reality, it doesn't look so well," said Dennis Ross, who served as a top Mideast adviser to Mr. Obama during his first term. "Is this a time America should look ineffective?"

Current and former U.S. officials said Mr. Kerry and his aides are likely to continue some form of mediation—though it might not be as aggressive as before. The secretary of state has made more than a dozen trips to the region since assuming his post last year.

A dramatic step that U.S. officials say Mr. Kerry has considered is to lay down his own plan for the creation of an independent Palestinian state and force the two sides to either support or reject, a step the Palestinians have backed in the past.

These officials said, however, that a more likely scenario is for Mr. Kerry try to extend the current talks beyond the April deadline by reviving the inducements offered to both sides in recent weeks.

The current crisis in talks came about when Mr. Netanyahu last weekend balked at releasing Palestinian prisoners as mandated by the terms of the current peace process because, he said, the Palestinians hadn't agreed to talk past the April 29 deadline. U.S. officials said they believed the Israeli leader was leaning toward eventually meeting his commitment after the U.S. offered to release the American spy Jonathan Pollard, who was convicted in 1985 of passing high-level American intelligence to Israel's government. This has long been a request of successive Israeli governments.

But Mr. Abbas responded to the failed prisoner release by quickly moving his government to join 15 international conventions, some associated with the United Nations. Israel has said this represented a breach of the negotiating process. Still, U.S. officials were relieved he didn't seek to join organizations seems as most threatening to Jewish state—such as the International Criminal Court.

U.S. officials on Friday, despite Mr. Kerry's sober analysis of events, stressed that there was still a path forward.

"We're still negotiating," said State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf late Friday. "I think until we get to the end of this process, we should all be cautious about making predictions about what will come next."

Indeed, the Israel government remained sanguine despite Mr. Kerry's statements, holding out hope that there was still room to get talks running again and that the Americans would help.

An Israeli official said his government felt both sides still had time before April 29 to work something out of Mr. Kerry's proposals.

"While the Americans said it's up to the parties now, I don't think they will be taking a back seat," the Israeli official said. "I don't think the work that was done on the framework is useless."

The future of the Mideast process is serving as the bellwether by which to gauge Mr. Kerry's stewardship of American foreign policy, said U.S. and European officials.

Mr. Kerry, asked Friday if the threats to the Mideast process marked a failure, he said: "I will say that none of this time has been wasted because much has been narrowed and discussed in the course of the last months."

Mr. Kerry has defined his tenure through his brand of personal diplomacy, spending hours of one-on-one meetings with Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Abbas.

His supporters said such relationships are vital to success in the Middle East; detractors have charged his approach largely lacked any substantive change in approach to the conflict.

In recent days, Palestinian leaders have said Mr. Kerry oversold the advance he'd made on the process and that he didn't push Mr. Netanyahu hard enough to make concessions. Others have accused him of overestimating the value of his own stature.

"The message has been: What's different this time? The secretary of state will personally deliver this," said Daniel Levy of the European Council on Foreign Relations, a London think tank. "They believed if the secretary of state was invested enough, it would happen."

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