



The “Incredible” John Kerry: Ineffectiveness and Inconsistency

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It was painful to watch. Secretary of State John Kerry trying to explain and defend American foreign policy in the Middle East is such an uncomfortable sight. One almost wants to ask him to stop to save him from his own misery.

It was about three and a half years ago when Kerry, speaking before a congressional hearing, told lawmakers that the two-state solution had about 18 months left. This past week during the annual Saban Forum, a Brookings Institution dialogue between American and Israeli leaders, he [told the audience](#) that time was not yet up and, in fact, that time was “a function of belief.”

Kerry admitted that Washington’s relationship with Israel is unique in the world and that the United States gives Israel “more than 50 percent of the total that [the US gives] to the entire world.” Despite this fact, he continued, when the United States issues a “warning today when we see a new settlement announced. Nothing happens. It’s ignored, a new settlement goes up. New units, new sales.”

His interviewer, Jeffrey Goldberg, put the question to him bluntly:

“MR GOLDBERG: Why don’t you have any leverage with the Israeli Government? Why do you – what – you’re describing a situation in which you have zero leverage.

SECRETARY KERRY: I think we do – I think we do have leverage --

MR GOLDBERG: But they never listen to you.

SECRETARY KERRY: No, they don’t, and they haven’t listened on settlements, that’s correct – hasn’t been listened to on settlements.”

It is important to remember here that Mr. Kerry is Secretary of State of the United States of America, the single biggest economic and military power on earth. Israel, a small state of a few million people, is highly dependent on this power.

The fundamental problem in Kerry’s approach—and indeed in the approach of his predecessors when it comes to Middle East peace policy—is that such arguments for peace are made entirely through the lens of Israeli security. According to this line of thinking, Israel should make peace because that is how you secure Israel. But this puts the United States in a position of debating with Israeli leaders over who has a better understanding of Israel’s security interests. This is an argument that US policymakers are always going to lose; while Washington might believe in this

approach, history has shown that when it comes to credibility, Israelis have sided with their own leaders.

Such argumentation is also problematic because it puts the Israelis in the driver's seat, allowing them to stipulate that only when and if Israel's every security concern is met can there be progress on peace. This creates incentives for Israelis to put up never-ending obstacles and to constantly point the finger at the Palestinians—whom they occupy militarily—in order to drag out the occupation for as long as possible, all the while building settlements that make disentanglement more and more difficult.

But what about the rights of Palestinians? Israel's military occupation will soon enter its 50th year. Palestinian refugees have lived in limbo for nearly 70 years. Palestinians in Israel continue to live as second class citizens. One is hard pressed to ask, therefore, why should the rights of Palestinians, which are grounded in international law, be subject to the security whims of Israel? In what other situation on earth does the United States accept the principle that the human rights of a people are dependent on the extent of security felt by their oppressor?

Kerry was steadfast. Despite the failure of his approach, he argued that there is no alternative and that little could be done differently. Years of failure to support Palestinian human rights and to craft a just resolution, however, come with a cost, including the erosion of American credibility.

Interestingly, this does not seem to be lost on Secretary of State Kerry when it comes to Syria. In the same discussion between American and Israeli leaders, he spoke of the perception of the American position in the region after President Obama declared there would be consequences if chemical weapons were used in Syria, but then did not follow through. Regarding the United States' failure to strike Syria when its government used chemical weapons to attack an area near Damascus in 2013, Kerry noted that “the lack of doing it perception-wise cost us significantly in the region, and I know that and so does the President. As much as we think it's a misinterpretation of sort of – it doesn't matter. It cost. Perception can often just be the reality.”

Do Secretary Kerry and President Obama understand the costs to American credibility of calling for an end to settlements while, at the same time, continuing to handsomely finance war crimes through unyielding support for the Israeli government?

In this case, Washington's support for Israel as it continues illegal colonization of Palestinian territory is not merely a matter of perception; it is very much a matter of reality. Countless observers across the Arab and Muslim worlds wonder when the American government will grasp the inconsistency and injustice of its policies toward Israel and Palestine.