

From: Office of Terje Rod-Larsen
Sent: Thur 4/3/2014 1:01:37 PM
Subject: April 3 update

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Article 1.

Bloomberg

John Kerry, Thwarted by the Middle East

Jeffrey Goldberg

Apr 3, 2014 -- Well, God bless John Kerry for trying.

It appears as if the latest attempt by the U.S. to make the Palestinians and Israelis embrace reason is failing. It is true American negotiators have misstepped and miscalculated at different moments in the peace negotiations led by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry. There will be plenty of time for autopsies. But two points are worth remembering right now.

One, the missteps and miscalculations (and myopia) of the Israelis and Palestinians are what matter most. Two, U.S. President Barack Obama's administration, and specifically its secretary of state, deserve credit for maintaining the belief -- in a very American, very solutionist sort of way -- that the

application of logic and good sense and creative thinking could bring about, over time, a two-state solution to the 100-year Arab-Jewish war.

A third, additional, point: Maybe it's not actually over. Maybe Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, lately praised by Obama as the most moderate Palestinian leader we may ever see, will come to realize that his decision to seek international recognition of an imaginary state of Palestine is not the cleverest way to bring about the creation of an actual Palestinian state, assuming a Palestinian state in part of his people's homeland is what he actually wants. Maybe Abbas will realize that recognizing, in some form or another, that the Jewish people have a legitimate claim to a state on at least a portion of their ancestral homeland could motivate the vast Israeli political center to embrace the sort of concessions Abbas says he wants Israel to make.

Maybe Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will come to see that his country's addiction to West Bank settlements, particularly those that loom over Palestinian cities, is not only ruinous to Israel's international reputation, but also is leading Israel toward a de facto binational future, ending the dream of a Jewish-majority haven in a world that has abused Jews for 2,000 years.

Meaningful gestures from Abbas and Netanyahu -- not Nelson Mandela-sized gestures, that would be too much to ask for, but some tentative display of large-heartedness -- would help overcome the mutual suspicion that seems to be sinking this latest attempt at peacemaking. Kerry is a talented man, but he cannot change the nature of these two leaders. Netanyahu is, as

Obama has noted, an intelligent and gifted political leader. But Netanyahu does not seem capable of understanding how moderate Palestinians might view his government's continued efforts to colonize the West Bank, the core of a future Palestinian homeland. Abbas, too, emerges from this process looking smaller than usual.

It's been my hope for a very long time that a Palestinian leader would view David Ben-Gurion, Israel's founder, as a role model. Ben-Gurion built the apparatus and economy of a state before the state existed, and he said yes to the grant of a state that seemed neither viable nor defensible -- but he made something of it anyway.

Abbas (unlike the deposed prime minister of Palestine, Salam Fayyad) wants the international community to hand him a perfect, ready-made Palestine. Hence his decision to seek membership in 15 international conventions, the proximate cause of the coming collapse of negotiations. Abbas is under the illusion that membership in various international conventions means he rules a country. But the moral support of Bolivia and Thailand and Norway and Malawi will not bring about the creation of a state. Only Israel can conjure a Palestinian state into existence.

Kerry is arguing it is "completely premature" to issue a death certificate for the peace process, but no breakthroughs seem remotely imminent. This version of the peace process started last year with a grand promise by the Obama administration to conclude a peace deal within months. When that seemed impossible to achieve, the administration downshifted, trying to convince both parties simply to sign onto a framework

agreement, one that would define the issues to be negotiated later. That didn't work either.

This week, we saw the administration float the idea of releasing Jonathan Pollard, the ex-U.S. Navy intelligence analyst convicted of spying for Israel, in exchange for some Israeli movement on the peace process. As I wrote on Monday, this was both a dubious idea generally and extremely unlikely to bring about advances in negotiations. If anything, it was a sign of desperation. As Andrew Exum and others have noted, why would the mediator in a dispute make concessions to one of the parties seeking mediation? It's up to the parties to make concessions to each other. Obama has argued that the U.S. can't want a peaceful compromise between Israelis and Palestinians more than the parties want it themselves. The Pollard balloon (now punctured, presumably) suggests Kerry wants a negotiated settlement just a bit too much.

Then again, when this latest iteration of the peace process began, I, like many others, had some fun at Kerry's expense (noting a presumed desire on his part to win the Nobel Peace Prize), but now I regret that. Yes, there were plenty of missteps along the way, but, really, how can we blame a man for seeking peace?

Jeffrey Goldberg is a columnist for Bloomberg View writing about the Middle East, U.S. foreign policy and national affairs. He is the author of "Prisoners: A Story of Friendship and Terror" and a winner of the National Magazine Award for reporting.

Asia Times

US 'peace process' charade plays on

Ramzy Baroud

Apr 2, '14 -- As the US-imposed April 29 deadline for a "framework" agreement between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority looms, time is also running out for the American administration on the issue. The Barack Obama administration needs to conjure up an escape route to avoid embarrassment if the talks are to fail. The Americans were likely aware when this latest process launched that peace under the current circumstances is unattainable. Israel's ruling coalition is adamantly anti-Arab, anti-peace and against any kind of agreement that falls short of endorsing the Israel's apartheid-like occupation of Palestine. Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his allies on the right, including the far-right and ultra-nationalists, would like to see Palestinians crammed in disjointed communities, separated from each other by walls, settlements, Jewish-only bypass roads and a military presence including permanent Israeli control of the Jordan Valley. Politicians tirelessly speak of peace, but Israelis have had only one vision in mind since the 1967 war that signaled a final conquest of all of historic Palestine. This vision is based on Ze'ev Jabotinsky's 1923 concept of an "Iron Wall" separating Jews from native Palestinians.

"Zionist colonization must either stop, or else proceed regardless of the native population. Which means that it can proceed and develop only under the protection of a power that is independent of the native population - behind an iron wall, which the native population cannot breach, " wrote Jabotinsky. This concept was coupled with the Allon plan, named after Yigal Allon. He was a former general and minister in the Israeli government who took on the task of drawing an Israeli design for the newly conquered Palestinian territories in 1967.

It makes no sense for a leader like Netanyahu - backed by one of the most right-wing governments in Israeli history - to bargain with Palestinians on what he considers to be Eretz Yisrael - the Whole Land of Israel. He has shown no desire to reach an agreement that would provide Palestinians with any of their demands, never mind true sovereignty. It is implausible that the Americans would be unaware of Israel's lack of interest in the new peace talks. For one, Israeli extremists like Naftali Bennett - Israel's minister of economy and the head of the right-wing political party the Jewish Home - were constantly reminding the US through unconstrained insults that Israel is simply not interested. The Americans persist, however, for reasons that are hardly related to peace or justice. Previous administrations suffered unmitigated failures in the past as they invested time, effort, resources, and their reputation - to a greater extent than Obama's - on a Middle East peace agreement. There are the familiar explanations of why they failed, including the objection to any US pressure on Israel by the "pro-Israel lobby" in Washington, which remains very strong despite setbacks. The lobby maintains a stronghold on the US Congress in all matters related to Israel and Israeli interests.

Preparing for the foreseeable failure, US Secretary of State John Kerry has remained secretive about his plans, leaving analysts in suspense over what is being discussed between Mahmoud Abbas's negotiators and the Israeli government. From the very start, Kerry has downgraded expectations. But the secrecy didn't last for long. According to Palestinian sources cited in al-Quds newspaper, the most widely read Palestinian daily, Palestinian Authority President Abbas pulled out of a meeting with Kerry in Paris in late February because Kerry's proposal didn't meet the minimum of Palestinian expectations. According to the report, it turned out that Kerry's ambitious peace agenda was no more than a rehash of everything which Israel had previously tried to impose by force or diplomacy, and which Palestinians had consistently rejected. These include reducing the Palestinian aspiration of a Jerusalem capital into a tiny East Jerusalem neighborhood (Beit Hanina), and allowing Israel to keep 10 large settlement blocks built illegally on Palestinian land, aside from a land swap meant to accommodate Israel's security needs.

Moreover, the Jordan Valley would not be part of any future Palestinian state, nor would international forces be allowed there. In other words, Israel would maintain the occupation under any other name, except that the PA would be allowed a level of autonomy over Palestinian population centers. It is hard to understand how Kerry's proposal is any different from the current reality on the ground.

Most commentary dealing with the latest US push for a negotiated agreement goes as far back as George W Bush's roadmap of 2002, the Arab peace initiative earlier the same year, or even the Oslo accords of 1993. What is often ignored is the fact that the "peace process" was a political invention by US

hardliner Henry Kissinger, who served as a national security advisor and later secretary of state in the Nixon administration. The idea was to co-opt the Arabs following the Israeli military victory of 1967, and allow the sudden expansion of Israel's borders into various Arab borders with full US support and reinforcement. It was Kissinger himself who lobbied for the massive US military aid to Israel that changed the course of the 1973 war, and he was the man who worked to secure Israeli gains through diplomacy. While many are quick to conclude that the "peace process" has been a historical failure, the bleak estimate ignores that whole point of the "peace process" was never to secure a lasting peace, but rather to forward Israeli military gains. In that sense, it has been a great success. Over the years, however, the "peace process" became an American investment in the Middle East, a status quo in itself, and a reason for political relevance. During the administration of both Bushes, father and son, the "peace process" went hand in hand with plans for an Iraq invasion. George W Bush's roadmap, which was drafted with the help of pro-Israel neoconservative elements in his administration was this "war" president's "peace" overture. Naturally, the roadmap failed, but it helped maintain the peace process charade for a few more years. At least until Bill Clinton arrived on the scene to kick-start the process once more.

In the last four decades, the "peace process" became an American diplomatic staple in the region. It is an investment that goes hand in hand with their support of Israel and interest in energy supplies. It is an end in itself, and is infused regularly for reasons other than genuine peace.

Now that Kerry's deadline of a "framework agreement" is

quickly approaching, all parties must be preparing for all possibilities. Ultimately, the Americans are keen on maintaining the peace process charade; the Palestinian Authority is desperate to survive; and Israel needs to expand settlements unhindered by a Palestinian uprising or unnecessary international attention. But will they succeed?

Ramzy Baroud is an internationally-syndicated columnist, a media consultant, an author and the editor of PalestineChronicle.com. His latest book is My Father Was a Freedom Fighter: Gaza's Untold Story (Pluto Press, London).

[Article 3.](#)

The Council on Foreign Relations

Is the White House Pulling the Plug on Kerry's Peace Mission?

Robert M. Danin

Posted on April 2, 2014 -- Secretary of State John Kerry abruptly cancelled his Middle East shuttle diplomacy yesterday less than a month before his self-imposed deadline for concluding an Israeli-Palestinian peace treaty. The New York Times leads today with a quote from a senior Obama administration official saying, "Mr. Kerry's decision not to

return to the region immediately reflected a growing impatience in the White House, which believes that his mediating efforts have reached their limit and that the two sides need to work their way out of the current impasse.”

If true, it would mean that the White House had cut the legs out from its lead diplomat just as he was trying to avert a complete meltdown of the U.S.-initiated high-stakes diplomatic process. It followed a dramatic day in which Kerry had thrown a diplomatic ‘Hail Mary’ designed to keep the fledgling negotiations from collapsing entirely.

While the details of Kerry’s most recent proposal remain sketchy, it seems to entail a package of measures that would include an agreement by both parties to remain in negotiations, Israel to proceed with its overdue release of a batch of Palestinian prisoners promised at the onset of this recent Kerry diplomatic chapter, an additional Israeli release of Palestinian prisoners, some limit to settlement activity, a Palestinian suspension of their threat to activate their membership in the United Nations, and as the news-grabbing sweetener, the U.S. release of Jonathan Pollard, imprisoned for spying on the United States for Israel. The situation became even more complicated when Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas last night announced he was taking concrete steps to join fifteen international agencies, though U.S. officials suggested that this move was a negotiating ploy and not an effort to undermine the secretary of state’s efforts.

As Kerry worked feverishly to salvage the process he initiated last summer, why would the White House turn it off lest it end in a blaze of recriminations, an absence of a back-up plan, and a

distinctly possible resort to violence on the ground? One reason may be that as the day progressed, and the voices opposed to the Pollard-for-more-peace-process grew louder (both the Republican and Democratic heads of the Senate Intelligence Committee came out against it), the White House decided that the Kerry proposal was too costly to support. Had Kerry not coordinated his ideas with the White House before floating them with the parties?

The White House suspension of Kerry's efforts may simply be a tactical move designed to force Israelis and Palestinians to stew a bit and ponder the cost of a failed peace process. Such a calculation, that the two sides need to work their way out of the current impasse, is conceptually flawed. Israelis and Palestinians have repeatedly demonstrated that they cannot find a way to "work their way out" by themselves. Indeed, the whole logic of Kerry's involvement was based on this assessment and of the need for a third-party facilitator.

However justified the criticisms of Secretary of State Kerry's approach, the Obama administration, having launched this high profile effort at comprehensive peace, cannot simply disown its own initiative just as it appears to be on the verge of collapse. In the past month, the president himself hosted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, and other Middle East officials at the White House, signaling that this peace effort was the administration's and not simply John Kerry's. As its patron, the United States has a responsibility, at a minimum, to find a soft landing for its fledgling effort.

A free fall now would be self-imposed, and would jeopardize the

serious and constructive Israeli-Palestinian cooperative efforts underway on the ground. It could rapidly lead to major diplomatic fighting in international bodies, such as the United Nations and at the International Criminal Court. The center of gravity within Palestinian circles could quickly shift towards radicals and renewed violent efforts at “resistance.” Israel would surely take punitive measures against the Palestinian Authority, withholding tax revenues that help pay salaries, limiting access and movement of Palestinians, and stepping up its military footprint in the West Bank.

Having repeatedly made the argument since last summer that such moves would be catastrophic, the United States owes it to the people of the Middle East not to be the party that helps bring about this disastrous outcome.

Robert M. Danin - Eni Enrico Mattei Senior Fellow for Middle East and Africa Studies.

[Article 4.](#)

The Daily Star

Israel is facing a backlash in America

Rami G. Khouri

April 02, 2014 -- Consider two incidents that occurred in the past few days in the United States and you should start to grasp the elements of a slow, subtle but steady and important shift that

is taking place in the country.

It is happening in that arena where pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian sentiments are being expressed in public and seek to influence American government policy, media and even the decisions of churches and non-government organizations such as student and professional groups.

In Las Vegas, three likely Republican presidential candidates addressed the Republican Jewish Coalition, basically a bank account for wildly pro-Israel candidates run by the casino magnate Sheldon Adelson. They leaped, howled and virtually stripped naked in proclaiming their endless love for Israel and Zionism, hoping to get hundreds of millions of dollars that Adelson will offer Republicans who are sufficiently pro-Israeli and might have a chance at winning the presidency.

Among these candidates are Governor John Kasich of Ohio, Governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin and Governor Chris Christie of New Jersey. Christie apparently went for the Buffoon of the Year Award. After he had accurately referred to the Palestinian West Bank as the “occupied territories,” he apologized in person to Adelson the next day for using this expression. Rabid Zionists prefer to call the West Bank part of the historic land of Israel, or, at best, a “disputed” territory.

This is a routine spectacle in the United States, and it has been going on for decades. It spikes to new levels of shameful political pandering when national elections approach. Yet powerful pro-Zionist groups and individuals that have traditionally shaped much of the discussion and official American policy on Palestine and Israel are suddenly finding

themselves increasingly challenged in public. Consequently, their influence is slowly being reduced to a shrinking body of Americans that is primarily composed of politicians in Washington, who are most susceptible to the pressures that extremist Zionists can exert, and who are also most in need of funds to run their campaigns.

At the same time as this was going on, a group called Students for Justice in Palestine followed the established procedures and received permission to hang a banner at the entrance to Columbia University's Barnard College in New York City, calling for justice in Palestine. The next day, after protests by pro-Israel groups, the university president ordered the banner taken down. In the past, the story would have ended there. This time, however, it did not, because Students for Justice in Palestine activists followed up with a campaign of articles in the local media, and they continue using social media to challenge what they saw as the pro-Israel bias of the administration.

Similar situations are taking place routinely across many American universities, or in professional and academic societies, mainstream churches and other groups that are no longer remaining silent in the face of Israel's continued colonization, subjugation and mistreatment of the Palestinian people and their land. Another example is the call this week by mainstream American civil liberties groups to oppose a proposed law by a pro-Israel Illinois state lawmaker calling on all university administrators to condemn the use of all academic boycotts – presumably because some American academics have called for boycotting Israeli universities.

This new tendency to stand up to pro-Israel fanatics in the U.S. reflects expanding global moves by governments, labor unions and others to boycott Israeli government or private institutions colonizing and exploiting Palestinian lands and communities. For the first time on a large scale, it is now more acceptable in mainstream American society to discuss Israeli behavior in public, assess whether Israel is acting justly or criminally and propose measures to force Israeli compliance with the rule of law and ethical international norms of behavior.

The simple but historic message I read in this trend is that traditional Zionist intimidation tactics are losing some of their effectiveness – other than against American presidential candidates, who will remain fully compliant with Zionist demands. Pro-Zionist fanatics (both Jews and Christians) are concerned because grass-roots activists are openly challenging them and, more importantly, organizing activities that include boycotts, advocacy for divestments and sanctions and public gestures as simple as planting posters or hanging banners that counter the Zionist extremists.

The activists for Palestinian justice and against Zionist criminality include a sprinkling of Palestinian-Americans and other Arab-Americans. But more importantly, they also include people from other ethnic backgrounds, such as white Anglo-Saxons as well progressive Jewish-Americans.

All of them feel they should stop being silent in the face of Israeli excesses and unethical behavior and take action to promote genuine peace and justice among Israelis and Palestinians.

Bloomberg

Don't Punish Abbas. Support Him.

Editorial

Apr 2, 2014 -- By suddenly turning to the United Nations for support, Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas has rebuffed the U.S.'s terms for brokering peace talks with Israel. But Secretary of State John Kerry is right to be cautious in his response: It isn't in anyone's interest to respond with punitive actions that would further upend the negotiations. Let's hope Israel and the U.S. Congress agree.

Israel, backed by the U.S., argues that by pursuing membership in 15 UN and international conventions, Abbas has violated the notion that the two sides should negotiate a settlement directly, rather than each taking unilateral steps to predetermine the outcome. The U.S. and Israel raised the same objection in 2012 when Abbas successfully pushed the UN to admit Palestine as a nonmember observer state.

This position is unfortunate. After all, Israel, even while negotiating with the Palestinians, regularly expands its civilian settlements in the West Bank, thereby affecting the size and shape of a future Palestinian state. This is the equivalent of dividing a pie while taking a few bites along the way.

What's more, Palestinian membership in a dozen or so

international conventions won't change anything substantial. Sure, the Palestinians will use their position to annoy Israel diplomatically; they've already done so through their membership in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

But it isn't realistic to think this is enough to pressure Israel to make otherwise unlikely concessions. Israeli governments have become inured to opprobrium emanating from the UN. "UM shmum" goes a popular rhyme, playing on the Hebrew pronunciation of "UN" and a prefix signifying dismissal.

Abbas was careful not to apply for admission to the one body that would make a difference: the International Criminal Court. If Palestine joins the ICC or seeks its jurisdiction, the Israeli officials responsible for expanding settlements would be vulnerable to prosecution for war crimes. The ICC's statute prohibits the "transfer, directly or indirectly, by the occupying power of parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies."

Israel will be tempted to punish Abbas anyway. Its most obvious method would be to withhold customs revenues it collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority. In the U.S., there will be pressure in Congress to cut the \$440 million in aid budgeted for the authority this year.

Weakening Abbas and his relatively moderate Fatah party would only strengthen the opposition, the militant Hamas, which supports the destruction of Israel. And for what? To send a message that the Palestinians shouldn't get in line with international accords such as the Geneva Conventions and the United Nations Convention Against Corruption?

The Israelis have everything the Palestinians don't -- a real state, a powerful military, a powerful ally (the U.S.), a strong economy -- as well as control over Palestinian land, airspace, borders and resources.

Which is why the UN venture is something of a sideshow. If the Palestinians ever want an independent homeland, they will have to win over the Israelis by making realistic demands and meeting Israel's reasonable security requirements. The UN can't make Palestine real. Fortunately, a solid majority of Israelis also want to see the creation of a Palestinian state through negotiations, as does the U.S. The responses to Abbas's UN move should preserve the promise of such talks.

[Article 6.](#)

Al Jazeera

Turkish local elections: One victor, many losers

Yuksel Sezgin

2 Apr 2014 -- Turkish local elections are now over. The ruling party, Justice and Development Party (AKP), won about 45 percent of the votes cast, while the rest was divided across three major parties in the parliament. The results are hardly a surprise.

As I said on these pages about two months ago, no one really expected that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's party would lose or suffer a major blow.

These were mayoral elections. They had no direct impact on the allocation of seats in parliament, but they will shape in a number of ways the future of Turkish democracy in the coming months and weeks. Let's analyse what the results mean, and what their potential impact may be on Turkish politics.

Passing the test

First, and perhaps one of the most interesting outcomes of the elections, is that despite the recent corruption allegations, leaks and increasing authoritarianism of the prime minister, AKP's voters did not penalise the party. On the contrary, they seem to have rewarded the prime minister by giving him the ticket he needed to run in the presidential elections in August. According to a recent poll, about 77 percent of Turks indicated that they believed the corruption allegations implicating the prime minister and his close circle.

Given that AKP enjoys the support of about 45 percent of the electorate, we may safely assume that there must be many AKP supporters among those who believe in the corruption charges - of course, that's besides those who dismiss the charges as a "foreign conspiracy".

Then the question we need to understand is why so many people continued to support a government which they considered "corrupt"? The mostly likely answer is, if I may speculate, that they did not consider the opposition parties any more trustworthy than the ruling party.

Also, many AKP supporters seem to subscribe to the prime minister's increasingly polarising identity politics of "us vs them" discourse, and continue to support the AKP regardless of corruption charges and increasing authoritarianism with the fear that if the "other" comes to power, they would lose political, economic and ideological advantages they've come to enjoy under AKP rule since 2002.

The opposition parties (eg, the Republican People's Party - CHP, and the Nationalist Action Party - MHP) have lost against AKP in six local and national elections as well as two referenda since 2002. It has now become crystal clear that unless opposition parties undergo major political transformations, they will most likely continue to suffer many more electoral defeats against AKP. One way to interpret the results of recent elections is that the Turks do not seem to trust the opposition parties or believe that they could rule the country any better than AKP.

With that insight, both CHP and MHP leaderships must reflect on and draw lessons from their continuous failure if they ever want to become a viable government alternative. Perhaps people do not want to vote for opposition parties whose only function is to bash the government and cry foul without putting forth a credible plan or project addressing the country's socio-economic and political ailments.

Election results have once more reminded us that Turkey continues to remain as a deeply divided and polarised society along two main axes: secularists vs Islamists, Turkish nationalists vs Kurdish nationalists. In this respect, the results coming from the east and southeast Anatolian regions are particularly important. The Peace and Democracy Party (BDP),

the political wing of PKK (armed Kurdish separatist movement), has reinforced its regional dominance by winning mayoralties in 10 provinces and further laid the groundwork for possible future autonomy in the Kurdish-populated areas.

Erdogan as president?

The elections have produced only one winner and that is the prime minister himself, not even his party. Since last year's Gezi demonstrations, he has increasingly personalised politics in Turkey. Even though these elections were local elections in which normally names and personalities of mayoral candidates play a greater role than any other consideration (eg, party identification or ideology), these elections were not about who would collect the garbage in the city, but a referendum on the prime minister staying in power.

Erdogan's success came at the expense of his own party. Even in the eyes of AKP supporters, the party has now been increasingly associated with his name and personality. AKP is no longer viewed as a legitimate political party but an association or a cult of those who "worship" Erdogan even when he sins. This raises serious questions about the future of AKP, and its survival as a political power after Erdogan retires to Cankaya Palace as president this summer.

With the support he garnered in these elections, he may soon declare his long-expected candidacy in the presidential elections scheduled for August. Even though he is widely expected to be elected as president, there is still a slight chance that another candidate may disrupt his presidential plans. If opposition parties repeat the collaboration they exhibited in Ankara's

electoral race (CHP fielded a former MHP mayoral candidate) in the presidential elections by fielding a strong candidate who can transcend traditional political cleavages and draw support from both AKP, and CHP/MHP constituents, the opposition may have a real chance of disrupting Erdogan's presidential plans.

As said, elections produced only one victor and that was Erdogan. But there were many losers including opposition parties, the Gulenists (followers of the charismatic Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen), civil society organisations, etc. But the biggest loser of all was Turkish democracy. It is widely argued by many analysts of Turkish politics that in the past (especially between 2002-2010) AKP has served as an agent of democratisation. However, as these same analysts point out, AKP, and particularly the PM, have become increasingly authoritarian in recent years.

For instance, fundamental principles of democracy such as freedom of speech, rule of law, separation of powers, judicial independence, and democratic accountability have been repeatedly and systematically violated by Erdogan and his government, especially since Gezi demonstrations in May and June 2013. Against this background, by giving Erdogan the approval ratings he desired, these elections may have well put the last nail in the coffin of nascent Turkish democracy.

Unfortunately, the prime minister's vindictive victory speech on election night has only fuelled the fears that the downward spiral of Turkish democracy would only deepen with new bans on freedom of speech, witch-hunts against "internal" enemies of the regime, and a possible invasion of Syria against which Erdogan declared a war during his victory speech.

Local elections were the first round of the long electoral season in Turkey. The second round is the presidential elections in August. Erdogan would not miss the opportunity to be the first popularly-elected president of Turkey - even though he has so far failed to turn Turkey's parliamentary regime into a US-style presidential system by rewriting the constitution.

However, it is highly likely that Erdogan - if elected - would concentrate all executive powers in his hands (under the current constitution the president has limited and mostly ceremonial powers) by appointing a Medvedev-like puppet prime minister in his place and rule Turkey with an iron fist in the next five or 10 years.

If Erdogan becomes president, it is also very likely that AKP would call for early parliamentary elections in Fall 2014 - the third and last round of 2014 electoral season. As noted above, the future of AKP after Erdogan is not certain. Therefore, we have every reason to expect that the party leaders may want to capitalise on the gains of local and presidential elections and harness pro-Erdogan sympathies while his legacy is fresh by moving forward the parliamentary elections set for June 2015.

Yuksel Sezgin is Assistant Professor of Political Science, Maxwell School of Public Affairs, Syracuse University.

Why the Saudis Are Panicking

Trita Parsi

April 3, 2014 -- As President Barack Obama must have noticed during his visit, there is a panicky tone to almost everything the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia does these days, whether it's campaigning for two years to win a coveted seat on the UN Security Council only to give it up immediately after the vote, or its public pronouncements of going it alone in the chaos of Syria, or its break with its fellow Arab state Qatar, or the closing of the Al Jazeera office in Riyadh, or the banning of the books of renowned Palestinian poet Mahmud Darwish. Or, of course, its opposition to diplomacy over Iran's nuclear program and the prospects of a US-Iranian thaw.

Riyadh's opposition to the Iran nuclear talks has largely been understood in the context of the larger Saudi-Iranian and Sunni-Shia rivalry. Consequently, Saudi's negative reaction was predictable, the argument goes. The Saudi royal house would undoubtedly not sit idly by as its regional rival negotiated its way out of harsh sanctions and into a potential US-Iranian rapprochement that could pave the way for an American tilt towards Tehran—all at the expense of Saudi interests.

But the intensity of Riyadh's reaction cannot be explained solely through the kingdom's displeasure at Tehran's diplomatic advances. In fact, the unprecedented opening between the US and Iran is arguably only the tip of the iceberg of Saudi Arabia's

growing list of concerns. Numerous geopolitical trends in the last decade have evolved in opposition to Saudi interests. Much indicates that it is the combination of these factors, rather than just Saudi displeasure with US-Iranian diplomacy, that best explain the erratic behavior of the House of Saud.

Consider the following developments. First, the United States has significantly increased its own oil production and reduced its dependence on Saudi oil. Driven by a boom in shale oil production, America's crude output has surged at record speeds in recent years. Last year, production rose a stunning 15 percent—the fastest absolute annual growth in any country in twenty years. According to the International Energy Agency, the United States will overtake Saudi Arabia as the world's top oil producer as early as 2015.

The official Saudi line reads that OPEC had survived past increases in production from countries outside OPEC, and that Saudi does not worry about the America's growing output. But some important voices in Saudi Arabia publicly disagree, charactering the US's declining dependence on Saudi crude as “an inevitable threat.”

Indeed, being a dominant producer on the oil market has provided the kingdom with vital political influence. The US's growing output is a direct strategic threat to that influence, according to some in Saudi.

Secondly, the Arab uprisings—and the Obama administration's reaction to those—have further added distance between Riyadh and Washington. Saudi Arabia was vehemently against the anti-Mubarak rallies in Egypt and viewed Obama's shift to the side

of the Tahrir square protesters as a betrayal. For decades, an understanding reigned supreme between the United States and its regional Arab allies: The Arab autocracies would help ensure stability in the region and on the oil market, and in return the US would protect the states and as well as their regimes.

But since the Arab Spring, a common view in the Middle East—not just in Saudi—is that the US has betrayed this arrangement and abandoned its allies. From the US perspective, however, the Obama administration simply saw the writing on the wall: Most Arab autocracies were quickly reaching their expiration dates and the demands of the populations for greater governance, freedom and rights were both justified and unstoppable.

The new reality is that in spite of Riyadh's massive arms purchase from the US, Washington will likely not come to its aid if the Arab spring reaches Saudi. This means that a critical avenue for Saudi Arabia to ensure regime survival is in jeopardy—at best—or, at worst, lost.

Thirdly, to make matters worse, a succession crisis looms in the Kingdom. A successor and a third in line for the throne have been appointed, but their reigns are not likely to be long due to their old age. In the next few years, the throne is likely to pass to the third generation of descendants of the kingdom's founder Abdulaziz ibn Saud. Even under the best circumstances, such a generational shift can carry complications. In these sensitive geopolitical times, the House of Saud cannot afford a protracted succession crisis while also facing the pressure of the Arab spring, Sunni-Shia tensions in its Eastern province—and the uncertainty of American protection.

Which brings us to the fourth factor: America's pivot to the east. Whether it is progressing at the pace originally intended or not, the reality is that the Obama administration has decided to reduce America's military footprint in the Middle East and avoid getting dragged into any additional ground wars there. In the eyes of some in Riyadh (and Tel Aviv), the Obama administration has relinquished its responsibility to uphold order in the region and abandoned its allies to meet their fates alone.

From Washington's perspective, the real strategic challenge to the US will come in Asia, not the Middle East. Further military entanglement in the Arab world will only undermine the US's ability to handle future crises in East Asia.

In practical terms, this means that the United States likely will not intervene in Syria militarily—much to Riyadh's chagrin—or put military assets at the disposal of its allies to fight their own regional rivals. The Obama administration is not going to permit its allies to use the United States as a proxy.

On top of all of this, US-Iranian diplomacy may lead to the unchaining of Iran. Tehran might break out of its isolation, be rehabilitated into the region's political and economic structures, which in turn can enable it to legitimize its geopolitical gains in the region. A new regional order may emerge, one in which Washington will quietly accept Iran's advances.

Had US-Iranian diplomacy made headway under former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami—at a time when Saudi-Iranian relations were warming—Riyadh would likely still have been hesitant and anxious. It would have cautiously welcomed the thaw, while remaining concerned about how US-Iranian

rapprochement would affect its interest. But there would not have been any of the current overreactions. The Saudi panic is more likely rooted in its fears about the broader geopolitical trends in the region, of which US-Iranian rapprochement is one of many concerning trends to Riyadh.

Ultimately, finding a new regional equilibrium that enjoys Saudi buy-in is critical. Saudi Arabia is an important state in the region for both economic and religious reasons. Just as the containment of Iran has become a source of instability in the region, any move that would push Saudi towards greater extremism would ill serve the region. Just like Iran, Saudi Arabia must be part of the solution. In particular, Riyadh has the ability and the responsibility to defuse sectarian strife.

Panic, however, will bring Saudi Arabia no closer to such objectives.

Trita Parsi is founder and president of the National Iranian American Council.