

Making Peace is Not Rocket Science

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Since retiring from the U.S. Foreign Service in 2006, I have tried in my research and my writings to establish “ground truth” regarding the American role in the search for peace between Israel and Palestinians. Following the 1991 Madrid Conference and the 1993 Oslo Accords, there was significant optimism that a peace agreement could be reached that would result in the establishment of a Palestinian state living side-by-side in peace and security with Israel. But poor diplomacy — by the parties and the United States — and malign actions on the ground, including settlements and terrorism, shattered that optimism. Today, we are further away from the realization of Israeli-Palestinian peace than ever before.

Israelis have elected governments since 2009 that have been more interested in maintaining the occupation, building, settlements, and creeping toward annexation of the West Bank than in arriving at an agreement with the Palestinians. Palestinians have sunk into despair and, absent effective leadership, have failed to respond to Israeli peace proposals and have often resorted to self-destructive violence and terrorism that have only worsened their situation. And Americans have largely given up: successive administrations have paid lip service to the search for peace but without conviction or the willingness to do hard diplomacy; and most analysts and pundits now seek a magical grail of non-existent alternatives to the two-state solution.

The question today, therefore, is whether it makes any sense at all, from a U.S. policy perspective, to continue thinking about a process of peacemaking designed to emerge in a two-state solution that appears to be of no interest to the parties themselves. Many colleagues believe this is foolhardy and self-deceiving; they argue that, if the United States is not ready to do the heavy lifting, then American involvement serves to perpetuate the status quo to Israel's advantage.

Other colleagues seek solutions that are not acceptable to one or both parties and thus are not viable. The so-called “one state reality” is not supported by Israelis — if it means giving Palestinians equal citizenship rights — or to Palestinians who see themselves as the weaker and more vulnerable partner in such an undertaking. Throwing these two peoples into a single political framework at this juncture is a surefire prescription for violence between the opponents in both societies.

The status quo is not static and thus not viable, for it masks a worsening situation on the ground. Creative ideas like confederation hold some promise conceptually, but all of them require sovereign, independent decisions by the two peoples in order to be launched. In other words, the parties need a two-state solution in order to arrive at any other outcome.

Notwithstanding all of this, the reality that Israeli, Palestinian, and American leaders do not want to face is that it is not hard to define what needs to be done to achieve peace between Israel and Palestine; however, none of the three is ready to make it happen. If they were interested and ready to make it work, they could consult library shelves that are full of plans and processes for breaking down barriers of miscommunication and building trust. They would avoid quick fixes or the belief that economics alone can solve the conflict. They would understand the basic asymmetries that exist and try to address them: bend toward Israel on security, and bend toward the Palestinians on territory and governance. They would push back against the spoilers and the opponents of peace and lead, rather than be dictated to.

Many will balk at this characterization of the problem and call it overly-simplistic. They will cite numerous examples of policies and actions that have prevented progress toward peace. For example, Palestinians will argue that Israel is a neocolonialist society driven by the ideology of Zionism that promotes exclusive Jewish sovereignty in all the territory of historic Palestine. They will draw on their historical narrative of what they term settler colonialism and dispossession, starting with the earliest Zionist immigrants on down to the West Bank settlements movement today. They will point to their victimization, not only at the hands of Zionists and Israelis, but also the collusion of the United States and others to deny them their right to independence and the right of those who they argue were driven from their homes to return to Palestine.

For their part, Israelis will argue that Palestinians have never accepted the right of the Jews to an independent state in their historic homeland of Eretz Israel. They will point to the history of Palestinian violence and terrorism, aimed at driving the Jews and Israelis from the land. They will argue that successive efforts by Israeli leaders — in particular, Rabin, Barak, and Olmert — to negotiate a fair peace settlement were met with stonewalling or rejection by Palestinians unwilling to negotiate. Israelis will also blame the international community for what they see as a double standard of one-sided criticism of Israel and for perpetuating the Palestinian refugee issue, unlike any other refugee situation.

Americans, the so-called honest broker, will blame both parties for failing to engage seriously in a peacemaking process. Americans will point to Israeli settlement activities and occupation practices, and to Palestinian violence and rejectionism, to explain the failure to arrive at a mutually-acceptable compromise. They will dismiss as unimportant the asymmetric power of the parties and the asymmetric nature of the negotiations. They will sympathize with Israel's security challenges that have affected the state since its independence. Americans will assert that security, political, and material support for Israel does not affect their ability to play the role of honest broker. And they will discount any responsibility for their own policy and negotiating failures, some of which I contributed to during my time on the "peace team" between 1989-1994.

The last time I taught a course at Princeton on Israel-Palestine proved to be a remarkable experience. The student leader of the campus effort to persuade the administration to boycott, divest from, and sanction Israel (BDS), and the student leader of the campus effort to defeat the BDS effort came together to request that I teach a course on the conflict, so as to provide a safe, academic space for discussion and debate. I focused the course on the competing

narratives of the parties, and we discussed history, politics, and peace efforts. For weeks, the class wrestled with these issues, but early debate tended to divide the students into pro-Israel and pro-Palestine camps, largely reflecting the narrative of the party they supported. But then a collective lightbulb seemed to turn on, and the students began thinking about ways to deal with and bridge the narratives to a point where mutually acceptable outcomes could be possible. Their discussions, heated but respectful, demonstrated a number of truths that can point to a way forward for the parties themselves.

First and foremost, the need for bold, confident leadership, ready to break free of the ideological and victimization shackles that prevent creative thinking and progress. The fact is that both sides have nearly identical, though opposite, narratives — regarding who is the victim, who is to blame, who deserves justice, who has a stronger claim to the land, and the like. When leaders spend more time justifying their own narratives and claims than thinking about ways to achieve their goals while also meeting the minimum requirements of the other side, stalemate is guaranteed.

Second, the importance of making choices and deciding. This is a year of elections in Israel. The Israeli people need to decide whether they want creative and ambitious leaders willing to lead them toward peace and reconciliation. In Israel, no election ever has been contested or decided on the issue of peace. This defies logic, in view of the extraordinary security and diplomatic challenges that Israel has faced since achieving independence in 1948. Thus, in the election later this year, Israelis need to decide two central issues laid out in their founding documents, namely, are they committed to a democracy that respects the division of powers among the executive, legislature, and judiciary and assures equal treatment for all citizens; and are they ready to define their borders in negotiations with their Palestinian neighbors?

In Palestine, it is time for elections. Indeed, the last presidential election took place in 2005, and the last legislative election took place in 2006. This means that Palestinians have been denied the opportunity to choose leaders who represent their political aspirations. This, too, defies logic, as Palestinians have taken up violence regularly, but have not contested their political views on borders and governance at the ballot box. It is time for elections in Palestine, so that the people can make the same hard choices that the Israelis need to make.

The third issue, sometimes called the “First Law of Holes,” advises when you find yourself in a hole, stop digging. For the past thirty-five years, since the Madrid peace conference and the Oslo Accords, even as they have negotiated, Israel and Palestine have continued to act in ways that undermine trust and seriously impact the chances of reaching an agreement. Israel needs to stop settlement activity and to start to reverse course including, for example, providing incentives for settlers to move back to Israel proper. Israel also needs to change its onerous occupation practices that deny Palestinians basic rights. And Israel must stop rampant violence by some radical settlers. Palestinians must stop violence and terrorism. They must disgorge Hamas from the midst of their communities. And they must start teaching their children about the value of peace and compromise.

Fourth, substance is an obvious critical requirement for progress, but it is not the most challenging issue. Indeed, both proponents and opponents have a similar mental image of what an agreement might look like — though they have diametrically opposing views on whether to try to actualize that outcome or to oppose it. Key elements include:

The land will need to be partitioned to allow for two viable independent states. Jerusalem's governance will need to accommodate the legitimate interests of Israel and Palestine, as well as the interests of the three religions that have a stake in the city's holy places. In this respect, studies undertaken by the Canadian-sponsored project, The Jerusalem Old City Initiative, remain viable. <https://www.uwindsor.ca/jerusalem-old-city-initiative/> Palestinians will need to accept the reality that refugees will not be able to exercise what they claim to be their right to return to that part of Palestine that is now the State of Israel. Israel will need to accept the return of as many refugees to the State of Palestine as Palestinian authorities admit.

The most vexing issue — internal and external security — can benefit from the significant effort undertaken years ago by retired U.S. General John Allen, provided that study gets updated with additional focus on Palestinian requirements.

There is one issue that defies easy resolution, namely the fears, trauma, and psychological concerns of both parties. The reality is that these psychological factors impact both sides. Both parties believe their very existence is in jeopardy. It would be facile to believe that the international community could play a role in mollifying these concerns. One-sided votes in the United Nations, double-standard policies that treat this conflict much more critically than any other conflict, and the changing dynamics of international power relations largely rule out a serious role for the international community. As such national traumas and psychoses will persist until years of peace unfold.

Many friends and colleagues will dismiss all of this as Quixotic fantasy, the ravings of an old dog peace processor unwilling to see reality for what it is. Some will argue that a two-state outcome is no longer feasible, given Israel's annexationist policies. Some will argue that Israeli actions are genocidal and can only be answered with judicial accountability. Others will rail against what they term Israel's apartheid system of governance. Some will point to Palestinian rejectionism and terrorism and the abiding hatred of Israelis. Some will argue that the support given to Hamas after October 7 — whether affirmatively or through silent approval — disqualifies the Palestinians as a peace partner.

I do not dismiss any of these critiques lightly, and I am not unaware of the seeming unreality of continuing to argue for a two-state solution when there are no leaders and no interest on the part of the parties. But just because dogs are old does not mean that they need to learn new tricks or that they lack judgment and experience. The reality — fifty years ago and today — is that there is no alternative to partition and an outcome that provides for two independent states, Israel and Palestine.