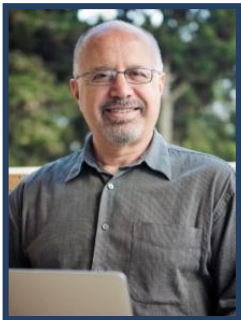




## THE HISTORY OF THE ARAB-ISRAELI PEACE PROCESS

By Shibley Telhami



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The Arab-Israeli peace process is a broad subject; therefore, this paper will briefly touch on some of the major peace agreements and negotiations that have taken place. It should be noted that as of today—and based on public opinion polls that I have conducted—most Israelis, Palestinians, and Arabs outside of the Palestinian territories believe that peace will never happen. This has resulted in a real problem, where people in the region no longer take the term “peace process” seriously. In order to understand how we got to this point, we need to look back at the history of the peace process on both the Israeli-Palestinian front and also on the Arab-Israeli front.

There are two important wars that help frame the Arab-Israeli conflict better than any other: the 1967 and 1973 wars. These two wars highlight the regional recognition of the necessity of a peaceful solution and also frame American diplomacy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The 1967 War was a major war between Israel and its Arab neighbors. It resulted in an impressive Israeli victory that led to the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and also to the loss of Egyptian and Syrian territories. At the time, most Arabs expected that this war would result in an Arab victory because Arab nationalism, led by Egypt, was strong, and also because Arabs viewed Israel as a temporary historical entity that was bound to disappear. Arab states fighting in that war suffered a humiliating defeat in 1967 and were faced with the reality that Israel might not be as temporary as they had assumed. The 1967 War not only established Israel's presence in the region but it also transitioned the sponsorship of Israel from Europe to the United States. Since then, the United States has been the principal military backer of Israel.

Six years later, Israel and the Arabs were once again engaged in warfare with one another in the 1973 War. Until then, no one expected the Egyptians and the Syrians to launch this war, let alone fight effectively after the devastating defeat in 1967. The Israelis had assumed that they were superior militarily. They also believed that the Arabs would not be able to recover from the 1967 War so quickly, especially after losing a large amount of territory. The Arabs' impressive performance in 1973 brought more realism into the Israeli position and demonstrated the need for diplomacy to address the conflict.

Up until the 1973 War, the United States and Israel both thought that the Arabs were not in a position to threaten Israel. They had little incentive to reach out to the Arab nations or to encourage serious diplomacy. The United States did try to reach out

through the Rogers Plan of 1970, but that plan received little support from the Nixon White House. Even Henry Kissinger was reluctant to respond to Anwar Sadat, the new president of Egypt in 1970, when he reached out to him because he did not take him seriously. As a result of the 1973 War, the United States found itself more directly involved with the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In 1973, there was a profound change in the way the United States began defining its interests toward the Arab-Israeli peace conflict. On one hand, in the 1973 War, the United States was Israel's main backer and wanted to protect Israeli interests. On the other hand, this war generated the Arab oil embargo, which greatly impacted the United States' economy. The Arabs used the oil embargo to encourage the United States to pressure Israel into withdrawing from the territories captured in 1967. The 1973 War and the subsequent oil embargo placed a major strain on the United States' interests in the Middle East because supporting Israel came into direct conflict with protecting the flow of oil to the West at reasonable prices.

The 1973 War was not used to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, but instead kicked in an American diplomacy focused on defusing the immediate crisis. To this date, there is a whole debate about whether Israel's insecurity and the domestic backing of the President of the United States in times of war should have been exploited to develop a more comprehensive peace plan. Others believe that a ceasefire would have been the best way to delay the possibility of revived conflict.

Regardless of the options pursued immediately after the war, the American conclusion was that mediation between the Israelis and the Arabs was the only way to resolve the conflict while simultaneously protecting American interests in the region; in essence, diplomacy was not only to resolve the conflict between Israel and the Arabs, but also the derivative conflict among US interests in the region. Thus, Arab-Israeli peace became an axiom of American foreign policy and consequently spurred American active diplomacy in the region. This trend continued with Henry Kissinger's diplomatic efforts to produce disengagement agreements with Egypt, Israel, and Syria and planted the seeds for what came a few years later in the Camp David Accords of 1978.

The conclusion that Arab-Israeli peace was an American interest was shared by both Presidents Nixon and Carter and also by members of Carter's administration such as [Zbigniew Brzezinski](#) and William Quandt. However, the initial impetus for diplomacy was to have bilateral agreements between Israel and Egypt.

Following the disengagement agreements mediated by Kissinger, the Geneva process was commenced. The aim of this process was to produce a comprehensive peace deal whereby Israel would negotiate with the Arab states. The Geneva process was unsuccessful for many reasons: the Israelis were uncomfortable with it, there were disagreements on who would represent the Palestinians, if the Israelis would even recognize the Palestinians, and the Arabs did not see eye to eye with each other. While in principle the Geneva negotiations seemed like a good idea, the likelihood that they would succeed was small. It was only after Anwar Sadat, the president of Egypt, decided that he was going to break the deadlock and go to Jerusalem and speak at the Knesset in 1977 that a major breakthrough occurred in the peace process.

Sadat was invited by the Prime Minister of Israel, Menachem Begin, to deliver his famous speech at the Knesset. This speech was monumental because Egypt was always Israel's main enemy. Delivering this speech was a dramatic move by Sadat in showing his acceptance of Israel. Sadat's speech reshuffled the deck in the Middle East and with it there was an American embrace of Egyptian-Israeli peace. However, this speech did not come as a surprise for the United States, especially since President Carter gave his support to Sadat in his pursuit of this particular path. It was this move from Sadat that ultimately led to the Camp David Accords of 1978.

It has been said that the Camp David Accords of 1978 were an example of negotiations between the Israelis and the Arabs that were successful. A testament to the negotiations' success is that they have lasted throughout all of the recent changes in Egypt. It is important to look at the historical context behind the Camp David Accords of 1978 because it is central in determining the prospects of success and failure. Take Anwar Sadat in this situation for example: Sadat wanted to get his territory back and wanted to advance the interests of Egypt. He wasn't doing it simply because he loved peace. This is the same president who waged a surprise war in 1973 and was now waging the battle of peace. Therefore, when you look at these acts in a historical perspective, you might gain some insight into prospects of success and failure of American diplomacy. Comparing the 1978 Camp David negotiations with the 2000 American mediation efforts between Israel and the Palestinians in the same location provides helpful insights.

The Camp David Accords of 1978 came at a time when the United States was seeking an agreement with Egypt—even aside from an Israeli-Egyptian treaty—because it wanted to gain influence over the Soviet Union in the region during the Cold War.

The United States had a strategic interest in seeing an agreement and thus had an incentive to be an even-handed mediator between Israel and Egypt. This did not mean that the United States was less supportive of Israel, just that it needed to take into account what Egypt wanted because Egypt had leverage. Egypt had more leverage with the Israelis than the Palestinians because Egypt was a large country with an influential military power. In addition, Egypt had far more weight with the United States given that the bilateral agreement was important. In fact, Israeli Defense Minister, Ezer Weizman, wrote in his memoirs that he was worried about Camp David. Weizman was concerned for Israel because he believed that Egyptian and American strategic interests were closer to each other than Israeli and American interests and that Israel might be cornered in these negotiations. This was the opposite of the situation in the 2000 Camp David Summit when the Palestinians thought that Ehud Barak, Prime Minister of Israel, and President Clinton would corner them in those negotiations.

Sadat believed that history was on America's side and he wanted to consolidate his strategic relationship with the United States. Therefore, he was prepared to go to Camp David and was prepared to fail as long as he was able to maintain his relationship with the United States at the expense of Israel. It can be argued that both Sadat and Begin were prepared to fail in order to preserve their relationship with the United States. Jimmy Carter was aware of both Sadat and Begin's intentions, which has been confirmed in recently released declassified CIA documents. These documents demonstrate that Carter was prepared to play the necessary cards to get each party to move forward. For example, when Menachem Begin was not compromising, particularly on the issue of settlements in the Sinai, Carter threatened to tell the American people that he was to blame for the failure of the negotiations. And then later, when Anwar Sadat packed his bags in an attempt to leave and declare the negotiations a failure, Carter went to his cabin and threatened to tell the American people that Sadat was the reason they failed. In the end, Sadat and Begin both stayed and came to an agreement.

This is the opposite of what happened at Camp David in 2000 when President Clinton brought the Israelis and the Palestinians together in an attempt to reach an agreement. Clinton came into office after the Cold War, during an era of Pax-Americana. The United States had just won the 1991 Iraq War and was considered the only superpower in the world, following the end of the Cold War. Clinton's agenda was to focus on the economy when he came into office, not on foreign affairs. He didn't particularly care about the Israeli-Palestinian question. However, he did care about the supporters of Israel, who were an important part of the constituency for him domestically. This angered a lot of Arabs who believed that he was ignoring the issue of Arab-Israeli peace. Though Clinton continued on the path of the Madrid process started by his predecessor, the process was stalled. He did not focus on the issue with any urgency until the Israelis and Palestinians asked him to sponsor the Oslo Accords in 1993, after secretly reaching out to one another to conclude this deal. Clinton agreed to sponsor the Oslo Accords because he believed the Israelis wanted it and also because it was a nice opportunity for the United States. Part of the reason for the failings at Camp David in 2000 was President Clinton's view of Arab-Israeli peace principally as a humanitarian gesture—not as a vital American strategic interest. His administration prepared poorly for the negotiations, with little inter-agency coordination, and made decisions at the end without much consideration for the broad strategic consequences. The issue became somewhat personal for Clinton, but there is no indication that it ranked highly as a strategic priority for the United States. Although that was not the principal reason for failure, it certainly was one that contributed to it.

The Camp David Accords were significant in that they were successful from the point of view of the Israelis and the Egyptians, they transformed strategic priorities, and they reshaped the distribution of power. They also reduced the chance of a major Arab-Israeli war because Egypt was the most effective Arab party in any conceivable war. And yet, there were also negative results. For example, many hoped that other Arab countries would join the project, but they did not. Egypt was thrown out of the Arab League and even the Saudis who were its allies abandoned it. Egypt was seen to have betrayed the Arabs, which hardened Arab positions and brought about the "Arab rejection front." On the Israeli side, Camp David toughened Israeli positions because it reduced the incentive to compromise on the West Bank, which was the cornerstone of any long-term peace with the Arab states. Consequently, the Israelis held onto the West Bank in a way that went beyond the fact that they continued to build Israeli settlements there. To make things worse, Camp David was principally a bilateral agreement between Egypt and Israel and although it produced an autonomy agreement for the Palestinians at Camp David, there was no link between the two. Even though there was a short-term agreement on a settlement freeze that was disputed by the Israelis and the Americans, there was no agreement on a long-term settlement freeze in the West Bank. The absence of a connection failed to produce an incentive for additional peaceful moves from either side. This was the case until the first Intifada in 1987, when Palestinians who were dissatisfied with the occupation took matters into their own hands. It was this act that finally created an incentive for diplomacy.

When the United States went to the Europeans and the Arabs and asked them to help dislodge Iraq from Kuwait in 1991, it was asked to promise to start genuine efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict immediately after the war. This led to the Madrid Conference of 1991. This conference was put together by the Bush administration through the efforts of Secretary

of State James Baker in Madrid, Spain in an attempt to bring the Arabs and the Israelis together. The Madrid Conference was a major breakthrough, even though it did not lead to any major agreement. At the time, Israel had a hardline government led by Yitzhak Shamir, who did not want to go into a negotiated settlement. During this time, the Bush administration came out of the Iraq war strong and had enough influence to manipulate Shamir into going to Madrid. In addition, the Syrians, who had initially rejected negotiations with the Israelis, were brought in to talk with the Israelis. In the end, it was the Palestinians' participation within the Jordanian delegation that became the avenue for real Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, even though it was not formalized in Madrid. Overall, the Madrid Conference did not succeed. This is partly due to the fact that the new Clinton administration, which succeeded Bush, focused on domestic issues—and also because the Palestinians were represented by the Jordanian delegation, meaning the Israelis did not have the opportunity to speak directly with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

The Oslo Accords in 1993 resulted from the lack of progress of the Madrid process. But the Oslo Accords had their own flaws. In spite of this, they were hugely important, not so much because of their flawed details, but because the main breakthrough was psychological. With these accords, there was a mutual recognition from Yitzhak Rabin, the Prime Minister of Israel and Yasser Arafat, the chairman of the PLO. That recognition was important not only as a breakthrough that defined new opportunities, but it was also important psychologically across the board, especially in so far as it generated the perception that peace was inevitable at the time—something that is essential for successful negotiations and building coalitions.

One of the problems with the Oslo agreements was initially thought to be one its strengths: postponing all major issues of contention—such as borders, Jerusalem, refugees, etc.—till the end. In the meanwhile, it was hoped that there would be confidence-building measures that would make it easier to resolve these issue. But this ended up being more a detriment than an asset. For one thing, delay was bound to give opportunity to opponents on both sides to try to derail the process. More centrally, nobody wanted to make a compromise for fear that it would result in paying a political price in the final status; why pay a heavy political price on a small intermediate step when you need all the political leverage to make the final deal? That fear was evident more than ever when Ehud Barak became Prime Minister of Israel in 1999 and contributed to the failings of the negotiations.

Now, let us discuss briefly the Obama administration's role in the peace process. Obama appointed George Mitchell to the post of United States Special Envoy to the Middle East almost on day one. However, American diplomacy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict under Obama has not been successful for many reasons. One reason is Obama's failure to demonstrate that he is prepared to pay a price. The second reason is the broken Palestinian and Israeli political scenes that Obama faced as he entered office: Palestinians were divided between Hamas and Fatah and between the West Bank and Gaza. And in Israel, elections resulted in a new hardline Israeli government. In addition, the Arab uprisings that occurred in 2011 transformed Obama's political priorities in the region, meaning that the Arab-Israeli conflict was not at the forefront of his priorities.

Where does this leave us now? First of all, people on all sides have never been more pessimistic about the prospects of peace; most don't even believe that peace is going to happen. Secondly, Arabs are preoccupied with the massive Arab uprisings and their aftermath; therefore, Arab-Israeli peace is not the central issue for many. Thirdly, the Obama administration is currently preoccupied with more than it can deal with both globally and in the Middle East. However, Secretary of State John Kerry still thinks that he might have an opportunity to move forward before the end of the administration. But barring some new development that creates urgency or new opportunities that shift the strategic priorities, it is hard to see how the current environment can produce an agreement.

Let me end with a thought—one that you are free to interpret optimistically, despite the gloomy picture that I managed to draw. Most profound change in history comes unexpectedly, and when there seems to be nothing but bad options—especially the status quo itself—things often turn on a dime. This was certainly one of the lessons of both the surprising 1973 war, and of Sadat's shocking journey to Jerusalem.

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