

Mediation in the Middle East

Mediation in the Middle East has a long and troubled history. Only once has it been successful: during the 1978 Camp David conclave under the tenacious management of President Jimmy Carter. The peculiarities of this sequestration *à trois* (Carter, Menachem Begin, and Anwar Sadat) help to explain why mediation has not worked since—as it did not in Camp David in 2000 (Bill Clinton, Ehud Barak, and Yasser Arafat).

The most critical difference between the Camp David conferences was the desire of Israeli prime minister Begin and Egyptian president Sadat to be forced into a deal. Indeed, they may have arrived at the Maryland mountain retreat with the basic outlines already in hand or, more precisely, in mind. Yet, they insisted on haggling over each and every detail, a strategy that entailed fits of pouting and threats of failure to force Carter to intervene in favor of this or that side. Essentially, they had already made their decisions, however, as indicated by Sadat's surprise visit to Jerusalem in November 1977 during which he made his famous proclamation, "No more war!" The secret negotiations between Cairo and Jerusalem took place thereafter.

At Camp David I, Carter merely had to execute the moderator's classic tasks and seize clear opportunities. One honest-broker negotiating tactic that Carter used was to detect and then articulate the compromise or transcendental solution hidden in a seemingly irreducible clash over particulars. A second approach was to push the players into a desired outcome by threatening the recalcitrants with the loss of U.S. benevolence, allowing the "victim" to tell his home audience, "I resisted, but for the greater good of the country, I decided to yield." The third tactic was the disbursement of side payments to compensate both antagonists for their real or pretended losses.

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Thus, Carter promised ample financial aid to Israel and Egypt, specifically, sophisticated U.S. arms (F-16 aircraft and Abrams tanks) to Egypt, which in the past had had to rely on less-than-state-of-the-art Soviet equipment.

Yet, one must not neglect the basics that made Carter's mediation possible. The conflict between Israel and Egypt, two established and strong states, centered on a piece of barren land that the Israelis did not really need—the Sinai Peninsula—provided that a party stronger than the two

contenders would supervise and guarantee demilitarization. In return for relinquishing the Sinai, Israel got what it craved most—maybe not real peace, but nonbelligerency that has lasted for more than 30 years. For the first time since the birth of Israel in 1948, Israel's strongest foe had left the Arab coalition. The result was not so much "land for peace" as "Sinai for strategic advantage."

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In more general terms, the Egyptian-Israeli instance offered a clear "saddle point," as labeled in game theory—a resting point in the matrix of Pareto optimality. Yet, none of these conditions exists in the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is why mediation has proven futile so far. First, not just land is at issue, but also legitimacy and the exclusive possession of it. Although opinion data show that a majority of Israelis favor a Palestinian state in principle, no such data has been collected from Gaza and Ramallah. Indeed, evidence points to the opposite. On the symbolic level, official Palestinian maps show a Palestine extending from the river to the sea. On the rhetorical level, Palestinian leader Arafat prevaricates, if not dissimulates, on recognition of Israel. Terrorism against civilian targets inside Israel, as well as the frank admissions of Hamas and similar organizations, spell out the point in blood—the true quest is not for Hebron, but for Haifa. For the Israelis, Arafat's insistence on a Palestinian right of return compounded the existential threat. Indeed, Camp David 2000 was dead the moment Arafat claimed such a right for the refugees of the wars of 1948–1949 and 1967 as well as for their descendants. The Israelis correctly saw this statement as a declaration of war by other means—the dissolution of their nation-state not by Arab armies but by Arab majorities.

The conflict, then, involves much more than a flag and a passport for Palestinians. It is about borders and the nature of the polities within them. Palestinians dream about using demography to redefine, if not dissolve, Israeli sovereignty. Israelis, on the other hand, agree to a Palestinian state in principle, but in effect claim a type of suzerainty that limits both the sovereignty

and the domestic composition of this state. Thus, Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon's "Operation Protective Shield" in early 2000 sought not only to root out terrorist infrastructure but also to gain proactive power over Palestinian governance. All Israeli governments have insisted on an enduring right of supervision over the future Palestinian state's armament and air space—plus the right to (some) settlements inside Palestinian territory.

In sum, the problem now facing the Israelis and Palestinians is the Egyptian-Israeli conflict not just squared, but cubed. The present version is about land and legitimacy, as well as about control of holy places (which adds the nonnegotiable issue of faith to all the other intractabilities) and the right to penetrate each other's national space and sovereignty. Compared to this constellation, the mediation at Camp David I was a cakewalk.

The Role of Mediators

What, then, can others do—whether the United Nations (UN), the European Union, the United States, or the Arab world?

Israel perceives the UN as irreducibly biased in favor of the Palestinians, and Arabs in general. The long history of anti-Israeli (or "anti-Zionist") UN resolutions since the 1960s reveals this assessment to be more than a figment of the Israeli imagination. The UN is thus reduced to the role of a bystander whom the parties may use as an active facilitator only after peace has been achieved.

The EU is not as tainted in Israeli eyes. Yet, it has routinely defined evenhandedness as pro-Palestinian neutrality. The historical record would be harsher if successive German governments, notably the one represented by Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, had not regularly softened the blow of EU resolutions and demarches critical of Israel. At this point, only Fischer has credibility in Jerusalem, Gaza, and Ramallah. Credibility, however, is not enough; one also needs power to broker peace.

Mediators should ideally be stronger than either party to a conflict, especially in an existential clash such as the Israeli-Palestinian one. The issue dividing Egypt and Israel was tough, but not a matter of life and death, legitimacy and sovereignty. The dispute between Israel and the Palestinians is an example of a conflict whose agenda simply overwhelms negotiators. Indeed, the agenda keeps growing, as demonstrated by the more recent addition of millenarian religious claims in the name of Islam or Messianic Judaism. Mediators must generate a superior counterweight, one that ensures mutual security above all, to these centrifugal forces. Could the Arab states weigh in? Before one approaches that question, one must resolve a prior one: Do the Arab states want to weigh in?

Containment of the conflict is the realistic ambition of moderators here and now.

First, discount Iraq in its current Saddamist guise. Iraqi president Saddam Hussein has been living under mortal threat from the United States. He will not relinquish the hatred-for-Israel card that might help him mobilize the Arab world against the “Great Satan,” as the Iranians are wont to call the United States. Discount as well, though less decisively, Syria, now beholden to the dynastic dictatorship of the Assads. Damascus’s rejection of several Israeli “Golan for peace” offers suggests that the Syrian government needs the festering conflict for domestic mobilization and control. Jordan is too weak to make the first step toward an Israeli-Palestinian peace, though it has clung boldly to the peace it signed with Israel in 1994. The smaller Persian Gulf states have virtually no weight at all, leaving Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Both Egypt and Saudi Arabia are, at a minimum, ambivalent. Authoritarian to the core and faced with barely suppressed domestic dissent, Cairo and Riyadh have the clout and the legitimacy, but not the domestic power. For them, too, the bugaboo of Israel (and, alas, Judaism) may be too useful to be dispatched to the dustbin of Arab politics. Israel is a convenient focus of hatred that deflects threats to the Egyptian and Saudi regimes.

As the intermittent “Fahd Plans,” most recently in the guise of the Abdullah Plan (full withdrawal for full recognition), show, however, these two key players may be tiring of the conflict. The hotter the war between the Israelis and Palestinians becomes, the greater the probability of entrapment of other Arab states in the struggle. For the Egyptians in particular, as perusal of their state-controlled press indicates, this prospect is about as attractive as Holy Communion is to the Devil. Ambivalence remains, however, rendering the mediator’s robe threadbare even before it is donned.

If anybody can turn the impossible trick of bringing peace to the Middle East, the “hyperpower,” as the French like to call the United States, can. U.S. assets are threefold. First, regardless of the depth of attachment by Americans to their fellow democracy (and strategic asset) in the Middle East, the United States has credibility. Second, it has ample resources for side payments; it can cajole both sides with benefits both material and symbolic. Finally, it has the clout to guarantee the security of both Israel and Palestine—the most critical task of all.

The dismal failure of Camp David II and, more importantly, of Taba (where Israel added to its concessions) demonstrates, however, that these three assets are still not enough. At Camp David II, Arafat decided that he

could do better by traveling the road of Intifada and terror than the road of peace. In early 2002 in Jenin, the Sharon government sought to demonstrate that it, too, could accomplish more by using force. The purpose of its actions was to acquire a position of dominance from which it could dictate the borders and the internal composition of a future Palestinian state.

When two antagonists believe they can improve their positions by force, only three resolutions to the conflict are possible. First, Israel vanquishes the Palestinians. Second, the Palestinians vanquish Israel by provoking a catalytic war involving Arab states—or by making life intolerable inside Israel, leading to economic decay, demoralization, and mass emigration. Third, both parties fight each other to a standstill marked by mutual exhaustion. Because victory of one group over the other is highly unlikely, exhaustion will define the point where dreams are shattered, illusions are lost, and ambitions are blunted. In other words, the situation will then become ripe for resolution. That point has not yet been reached.

When that time comes, the United States could wade in with a realistic chance of success. It could define saddle points, disburse side payments, and offer tangible guarantees of security. Once the United States has cleared this road of its huge boulders, the Europeans could successfully become involved, especially to build something resembling a democracy in Palestine. The Arabs would have to offer at least benevolent neutrality to both parties, flanked by the “real” recognition of Israel and some subtle pressures on the Palestinians.

To state the issue in this manner is, alas, to diminish hopes for rapid resolution. If resolution—meaning a viable Palestinian state and an Israel accepted by most of its neighbors—is the long-term goal, containment of the conflict is the duty, and the realistic ambition, of moderators here and now.

In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, not just land is at issue but also legitimacy.

