

# The Long Dance: Searching for Arab-Israeli Peace

*A veteran American negotiator derives seven rules of the road from his decades of experience in Arab-Israeli peace talks.*

BY AARON DAVID MILLER

“THE ONLY LESSON OF HISTORY,” THE BRITISH historian A. J. P. Taylor once observed, “is that there are no lessons.” Maybe Taylor was right. But even with all the hazards of making historical analogies, there has to be some value in looking to the past to avoid mistakes in the future. Certainly this is true in American foreign policy, in which, despite enormous continuity, historical memory is often willfully or casually washed away or hijacked in the service of preexisting agendas, especially with the arrival of a new administration. I well remember the sardonic quip of a senior Bush administration official a few years ago at the beginning of George W. Bush’s second term: “We aren’t going to make the same old mistakes on the peace process; we’re perfectly capable of making new ones on our own.”

Nowhere is the presence of the past greater than in America’s elusive search for Arab-Israeli peace. Having studied or worked on Arab-Israeli negotiations for the better part of 30 years, I know a thing or two about failure. We certainly can’t be prisoners of the past, but we can’t ignore it either. Our friends and enemies certainly don’t. William Faulkner was right when he wrote that the past is never really over, it’s not even past. He would have felt right at home during the many negotiating sessions when Arabs and

Israelis trotted out their familiar dueling narratives. “All the 1948 refugees were ethnically cleansed by Israel,” a Palestinian negotiator asserted on one such occasion. “No, they weren’t,” his Israeli counterpart replied. “They left of their own accord, or at the urging of the Arab states.” For an American negotiator steeped in a let’s-split-the-difference mindset, this historical tick-tock can get pretty tedious, particularly at three in the morning.

I went to work at the U.S. State Department in the late 1970s as a Middle East historian and intelligence analyst. In 1988, I joined a small group of Middle East advisers and negotiators who provided counsel to Republican and Democratic presidents and secretaries of state, until I left the government in 2003. From that experience, I’ve derived several rules that may be useful as the bumpy road of negotiations toward Arab-Israeli peace that resumed in Annapolis in November stretches out before us.

## NO BRICKS WITHOUT STRAW

It’s sometimes hard for big, strong, optimistic America to admit that it’s not powerful enough to fix the world’s problems. I keenly remember how much in control we American negotiators would feel as the secretary of state’s plane touched down on this or that Arab or Israeli tarmac, and a motorcade whisked us off to a fine hotel where at least two floors had been swept clean of electronic bugs and foreign nationals and equipped with

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How can we divide it? In a Jerusalem marketplace, a Palestinian vendor and an Israeli haggle over a stem of myrtle, used in the Jewish holiday Sukkot.

all the modern amenities of a working State Department. But it's precisely when you begin to believe that you're in charge and can fix things that you need to be most careful. Too many times during my career I succumbed to what I'll call the fallacy of the negotiator's mindset: the seductive belief that all problems can be resolved through negotiations and that America can drive the diplomacy. In fact, we were frequently reminded that we were on the locals' timetables, subject to their agendas and at the mercy of their politics and preferences.

The first principle in finding a way to peace between Arabs and Israelis is that, because theirs is an existential conflict in which the stakes are physical and political survival, the core decisions belong to the parties, not to us. The biggest issues that divide Israel and the Palestinians—the future of Jerusalem, whether Palestinian refugees will return to Israel or a Palestinian state, and the precise borders of such a state—aren't called "final status" issues for nothing. And the stakes for

the locals, as the assassinations of Anwar el-Sadat and Yitzhak Rabin attest, can be very final indeed.

What this means in practical terms is that Arabs and Israelis rarely act in response to the entreaties and pressures of distant powers. They consider taking big risks only when local or regional calculations—prospects of real pain or gain—cause them to do so.

All the breakthroughs in Arab-Israeli diplomacy over the past five decades have followed this pattern. Without the October 1973 war, there would have been no disengagement agreements between Israel and Egypt and Syria over the next two years; without Sadat's trip to Jerusalem in 1977, no Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in 1979; without the Persian Gulf War, no Madrid peace conference in 1991; and without the first Palestinian intifada in 1987, no Oslo process during the 1990s, which brought the first direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

If they're smart, tough, and committed, American

mediators can take advantage of shifts in the region's tectonic plates, but they can't make those plates move.

#### **BUT YOU STILL NEED A BRICK MAKER**

Even so, successful Arab-Israeli peacemaking isn't a matter of spontaneous combustion. In the history of Arab-Israeli negotiations, there are only two occasions in which Arabs and Israelis reached significant agreements without any substantive American involvement: the ill-fated Oslo agreements of 1993–95, which began the tortuous process of Israel's exchange of land for security; and the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty of 1994. And even in these cases, the United States would come to play an important supporting role.

In every other breakthrough, serious and sustained American mediation was critical to success. The October 1973 war shattered the status quo, but it was Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's diplomacy that produced the disengagement agreements between Israel and the Egyptians and Syrians and the beginning of the very notion of a continuing peace process. Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977 made Egyptian-Israeli peace possible, but it was President Jimmy Carter's single-minded focus and persistence that produced the Camp David Accords and laid the basis for an Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty seven months later. The Persian Gulf War and the collapse of the Soviet Union shifted the region's tectonic plates in 1991, but it was Secretary of State James Baker's diplomacy that took advantage of the changes and produced the direct Arab-Israeli negotiations in Madrid, the first in 12 years. Even the more modest Annapolis meeting in November wouldn't have occurred without Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's persistence and focus.

There are many reasons why America is the brick maker, the almost inevitable mediator: the absence of contacts and trust between Arabs and Israelis; the need for an outside power to provide security and economic assistance to induce and support agreements; the parties' need to cite U.S. pressure as a justification for concessions that are politically unpopular at home; and, of course, the need for an effective broker to mediate, craft language, and even draft agreements. But if you asked me why the phone kept ringing all those years, I'd respond: the U.S.-Israeli relationship. The Israelis know that however divided they may be among themselves on this or that approach, their security and well-being depend on having a peacemaking process in which the United States is involved. The Arabs know, how-

ever much they may dislike some of our policies, that our close ties to Israel mean that there can be no serious and sustainable agreements without us.

When we use the U.S.-Israeli relationship effectively in our diplomacy (see Kissinger, Carter, and Baker), the United States can indeed deliver in ways in which everyone wins. When we use those ties unwisely, allowing Israel to unduly influence our tactics and strategy as a broker (see Bill Clinton), we can't possibly succeed. And when we permit our special relationship with Israel to become too exclusive (see George W. Bush), we have no chance to do effective diplomacy and no chance to succeed.

#### **PLAY THE PARTIAL MEDIATOR WISELY**

The secret of America's role in Arab-Israeli negotiations is the trust we've gained from Israel and the confidence we can engender among the Arabs when we use our relationship with Israel wisely. Let's be clear: The U.S.-Israeli relationship is closer than any tie we have with any Arab country or even with most of our allies. There are many reasons for this, including shared values, American public opinion, and, of course, the influence of the pro-Israel community, including millions of evangelical Christians.

Because of our intimate relationship with Israel, we really aren't an evenhanded broker in the technical sense. During negotiations, we rarely if ever adopt objectively neutral or equidistant positions between Israel and the Arabs. Indeed, we often operate on peace process software that automatically adjusts our position in light of Israel's needs and concerns. Even American leaders criticized at home as too tough on Israel are acutely sensitive to its interests: Jimmy Carter, for example, was determined to pursue a comprehensive peace at Camp David until Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin, along with the galactic challenges of bringing in the Palestinians, Jordanians, and Syrians, persuaded him not to.

This pro-Israel posture makes us a partial mediator. But because we do have Israel's trust, we can use our leverage as an advantage in negotiations, particularly when we find the right balance between reassuring the Israelis and pushing them to understand the needs of the Arab side. In these circumstances, we can be an effective broker and deliver agreements. That's what Kissinger, Carter, and Baker managed to accomplish.

Sadat was the first Arab leader to understand the advantages of this special American role. He banked on the capac-

ity of Kissinger and then Carter to get him what he wanted from Israel (a peace treaty and the return of the Sinai Peninsula, captured by the Israelis in 1967) precisely because America had Israel's trust. In the process, he also got a new relationship with America and large amounts of U.S. economic and military assistance. The PLO's Yasir Arafat and Hafez al-Assad of Syria saw the light after Sadat, but could never make as compelling a case with either the United States or Israel.

Perhaps the most difficult task for the Bush administration will be to find the right combination of toughness and reassurance.

Because it's spent seven years watching from the sidelines and giving Israeli leaders tremendous latitude to pursue their own agenda, often regardless of American interests, this will be difficult. The Bush administration's solid pro-Israel credentials and the president's personal relationship with Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert give the administration a lot of currency in the bank with the Israelis. Should Olmert and Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas actually go for a deal and ask for American help, the president would need to make a decision about how much of this political capital he wanted to spend. Given his public remarks about not imposing an agreement, the odds that he will try to force one on both sides are slim to none. But the United States will need to press both sides hard. There hasn't been a successful negotiation that led to a sustainable agreement in which the United States didn't need to push both sides farther than they initially thought they would go.

#### FOCUS ON THE ENDGAME

However long the odds of producing an Israeli-Palestinian agreement on these core issues, Jerusalem, borders, and refugees must be the subject of serious negotiations. It's important to discuss the lesser "interim" issues—settlement outposts, checkpoints, Palestinian incitement of violence and terror—but without a focus on the ultimate goal, the entire Annapolis process will collapse. The Oslo process failed for many reasons, not the least of which was the absence of an effort to define such an endgame early, and to manage negotiations wisely when they finally began

at Camp David late in President Clinton's second term. Today, no one—not the Arabs, the Israelis, or the international community—believes anymore in a peace process that doesn't outline a final destination; nor are the various interested parties likely to participate in one.

Another lesson of the Camp David experience is that

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pushing too fast or reaching too far in an effort to produce a quick presidential legacy, as Clinton did near the end of his term, will likely produce a failure we can't afford. Bill Clinton had the best of intentions, but he acquiesced to Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak's pressure for a high-profile summit where the gaps between Arafat and Barak would be too big to close, and without developing a fallback position or carefully thinking through the consequences of failure.

Weak leaders on both sides, deep disagreements over key issues, and divisions among the Palestinians don't augur well for success in the latest negotiations either, especially for a full peace treaty by the end of 2008, when the Bush administration will be all but over. Such a treaty would require marshaling billions of dollars to deal with refugees and security, and congressionally approved American security guarantees to Israel, probably including the deployment of U.S. troops in the Jordan Valley for years to come. More doable, but still extremely hard to obtain, would be a "framework" agreement. This could be a document of several pages spelling out the basic principles for resolving the core issues—Jerusalem as the capital for both states, the disposition of the refugees, and a return to June 1967 borders with land swaps for West Bank areas Israel wants to annex. The Bush administration could then pass this achievement on to its successor, which could help the two sides work through the details and provide them with the support they need. Above all, we must avoid another high-wire moment of truth like Camp David in 2000, in which we pushed for a breakthrough without the means to achieve one. A second failure of this

magnitude could well destroy for good the very idea of a negotiated two-state solution.

#### **BUT DON'T IGNORE THE SITUATION ON THE GROUND**

I'll never forget the feeling we all had as I left Washington with the small group of American negotiators for the fateful summit at Camp David in July 2000: If we couldn't deal effectively with the issues "on the ground"—security and settlements (and we couldn't)—how could we take on the core issues? Every Palestinian we talked to before Camp David made the same point: If Barak couldn't manage to return control over two villages on the West Bank close to Jerusalem, as Israel had pledged, how could they trust any promises he might make about the future of the capital itself?

One lesson of history is that the failure at Camp David was in part a product of the Clinton administration's failure to hold Israelis and Palestinians to the commitments they made at Oslo in 1993. The United States tolerated Arafat's acquiescence in violence and terror against Israel and put up with the Palestinian Authority's corruption, mismanagement, and failure to maintain the rule of law in Gaza and the West Bank. It relied on Israel to restrain settlement activity in certain areas but didn't seriously object when the Israelis continued building settlements in other areas, including Jerusalem. We largely kept quiet as Israel confiscated land and took steps to attract more Israeli settlers to the West Bank. Between 1993 and 2000, the settler population there doubled.

There is more trust between Abbas and Olmert than there was between Barak and Arafat at Camp David, but each side still has serious doubts about the other's desire and ability to meet its needs. The Bush administration's emphasis on the "road map" after the Annapolis summit shows that it understands the importance of getting each side to make specific commitments to improve the situation on the ground, but holding them to those promises will not be easy. The arguments the locals will use are ones we've heard before: Don't press too hard; if you do, we'll be weakened politically at home and won't have the support we need to take on the core issues.

However, the biggest threat to the Annapolis process is the schism within the Palestinian house itself. Abbas nominally controls 2.5 million Palestinians in the West Bank and the shell of the dysfunctional and weak Palestinian Authority. But Hamas won control of the authority's legislature at

the polls in 2006, and it reigns supreme over Gaza's 1.5 million Palestinians, who continue to blame Israel and America more than Hamas for their dire economic circumstances. As long as it retains the capacity to assault Israel with rockets from Gaza and terrorist attacks from the West Bank, Hamas makes any agreement almost impossible to implement. No Israeli prime minister can make existential concessions to a Palestinian leader who doesn't control all the guns. Right now, there are two masters on the Palestinian side. Abbas and Hamas have different patrons, and different visions of the future. Neither can knock the other out, and neither seems ready for reconciliation. The Israeli government finds itself in the bizarre situation of trying to make peace with one half of the Palestinian house even as it's engaged in a war with the other half.

The options for dealing with this difficult reality are few. Starving Hamas into submission hasn't worked; reconciliation between Abbas and Hamas isn't possible now because neither Abbas, Israel, nor the Americans want it; and forging an Israeli-Hamas accommodation seems almost unimaginable. That leaves two options: a major Israeli move back into Gaza to eliminate (at least temporarily) military infrastructure, or an Abbas-Olmert agreement on the core issues followed by new Palestinian elections, and probably Israeli ones as well, that secure broad public support for the agreement. That scenario would require an almost perfect alignment of the sun, moon, and stars—unlikely even in the land of revelations and miracles.

#### **IT'S AN AMERICAN NATIONAL INTEREST**

There was a time when I was convinced that resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict was the key to protecting American interests in the Arab and Muslim worlds. No longer. The Middle East is such a dysfunctional, screwed-up region that there is no single key to safeguarding what's important to us. The region has developed a potential perfect storm of looming disasters, none of which would be averted by the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The makings of these disasters include the ascendancy of a violent strain of Islamic radicalism, the possibility of another attack on the continental United States, the proliferation of nuclear technology, and an authority deficit that has given small actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah, as well as states such as Iran, the power to shape events in Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, and other volatile countries.

Still, managing the Arab-Israeli issue must be an impor-



The author (right) in Washington with Mahmoud Abbas in 2004, the year before the longtime PLO figure was elected president of the Palestinian Authority.

tant front in any American strategy in the Middle East. Success would buck up our friends in the region and either help change the behavior of our adversaries or keep them on the defensive. It would prevent another Arab-Israeli war, relieve demographic pressures on Israel, draw Syria into an orbit of greater accommodation and cooperation, ease tension along the Israeli-Lebanese border, shore up both the Israeli-Jordanian and Israeli-Egyptian peace treaties, and boost America's credibility and its reputation as a force for positive political change in a region that has come to identify the United States with military invasion, torture, and counterterrorism. Most important, a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would remove from our enemies' hands one of the most powerful weapons they have in marshaling supporters. Perhaps because the Arab world is so dysfunc-

tional and so divided on other issues, the Palestinian grievance resonates broadly and deeply in the Middle East. Yet we need to keep in mind that even if our post-Annapolis diplomacy ultimately succeeds, the Middle East is likely to remain fraught with dangers and challenges to our interests for years to come.

#### ABOVE ALL, DO NO HARM

Thinking back on my diplomatic career, I believe there ought to be a diplomatic equivalent of the Hippocratic Oath: Above all, do no harm. Avoiding costly mistakes is harder than you might imagine for presidents and secretaries of state concerned about their legacies, pressured by time, and lacking a full grasp of the dangers of overreaching at the end of their tenure. We also need strategies toward

the Middle East that are bipartisan and generational in conception, creating continuity between one administration and another. We should get over our obsession with doctrines and neatly packaged grand concepts. There is no single doctrine or concept that can encompass all the challenges that face us, particularly in this area of the world where so many

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complex forces are at work. There is a risk of getting invested in strategies, such as regime change, democratization, and even the “war on terror,” that raise expectations that can’t be met, don’t work, or don’t even accurately describe the challenges we face.

Still, there is one thing that we must and can do: start maintaining a fanatical commitment to seeing the world as it is, not as we want it to be or as others want us to see it. It made no sense to go for a make-or-break summit at Camp David in 2000, for example. In analyzing incorrectly what would be required from each side to complete a deal, we made a serious mistake, with serious consequences.

**F**or the Bush administration, the challenge of seeing the world clearly is particularly acute because too much of its view has been shaped by a conception of reality that, in the cases of Iraq and even democratization, is not real or in line with the situation on the ground. Largely under Secretary Rice’s influence, the administration has finally tempered its *transformative* diplomacy (its notion that regime change and democratization would by themselves resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) with a more conventional *transactional* diplomacy focused on actually negotiating the core issues. There are many who argue that having Arafat out of the picture was essential to any chance of successful negotiations, and there’s a good case to be made for that view. But that transformational change by itself was not sufficient. In the aftermath of Arafat’s death in November 2004 and the democratic election of

Mahmoud Abbas in January 2005, the Bush administration sat on the sidelines and did nothing to help the Palestinian Authority with the kind of economic aid and security assistance that would buck up Abbas, or to start a serious negotiating process. Our inattention (and Israel’s), as well as the flaws of Abbas’s own party, Fatah, laid the foundation for

Hamas’s election a year later and ushered in the seemingly irreparable split that now exists within the Palestinian community, a split that has massively increased the odds against implementing an Israeli-Palestinian agreement.

Now that it has succeeded in relaunching negotiations at Annapolis, it will take a great deal of hard work for the Bush administration to pass a working peace process on to its successors, let alone reach an agreement. If Secretary Rice can help broker a framework agreement on the core issues, so much the better. Such an achievement would ensure continuity, a negotiating process that the parties owned, and a commitment and investment from the next president.

The entire negotiating process set into motion at Annapolis will remain vulnerable, however, to a looming Israeli confrontation with Hamas. Such a clash is likely to waste time the administration doesn’t have, and lead to Palestinian civilian casualties, which are likely to weaken Abbas and anger the Arabs. In the face of this challenge, the Bush administration must do its part to keep the negotiating process honest and ongoing: It must push the Israelis and Palestinians to fulfill their road map obligations; work with the Arabs and the international community to prevent a humanitarian disaster in Gaza; strengthen Abbas’s security forces; and keep Israel and the Palestinians focused on the core negotiating issues.

With enough determination and luck, President Bush just might be able to hand off to his successor a working negotiation, an improved situation on the ground, and two other critical commodities: the hope that a two-state solution is still possible and the possibility that the United States can still be a major part of bringing it about. Given the hand the Bush administration inherited on Arab-Israeli peacemaking and the way it has played it for most of its two terms, that would be legacy enough. ■