

Will Trump Be to Palestinian-Israeli Peace What Nixon Was to the U.S and China?

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, JUN 8 2017

The last U.S. President successfully to negotiate a major peace agreement on the Arab-Israeli conflict that still stands today was Jimmy Carter in Camp David I, 1978. That Israeli-Egyptian peace still stands nearly forty years later and is the reason that Israel and Egypt remain two of the highest recipients of U.S. foreign aid today. However, there have been a number of strong successes in the intervening years beginning in secret London talks between then Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Shimon Peres and King Hussein of Jordan in April 1987, moving from there to talks fostered by George H.W. Bush and James Baker that led to the 1991 Madrid Conference, all of which culminated in the Oslo peace process of the 1990s. The decade of hope that was the 1990s in Israel and the Palestinian territories ultimately ended in the abrupt and overwhelming failure of the Oslo peace process in Camp David II, July 2000.

A senior cousin in my family was called in as a retired, 30-years (Middle East) specialist in the Department of State to help with the on-the-ground discussions leading up to Camp David II. I was in Jerusalem for academic year 1999-2000. He told me a few months before the accords that he thought they were going to fail. I did not understand it at the time, caught up as most academics were in the hope of the moment; he said, simply, that the parties were far too widely apart, and they were too distant to one another's most basic needs. I wanted very badly for him to be wrong. He was not.

The 1991 Madrid Conference was the first case in which Palestinian individuals were officially invited to participate in international talks with Israel. When Peres and Hussein met in April 1987, they sought to cultivate peace talks without the PLO. They preferred local Palestinians, who they saw as better representatives of the Palestinian people. Likewise, when the First Intifada broke out in December 1987, it began as a wholly and locally grassroots uprising. Palestinians made the decision to use the highly successful tactic of "minimal force;" because they were unable to compete with Israel on a technological (military) basis, they sought to win on a moral basis.

Local Palestinian leaders with locally-grounded support included Faisal Husseini, one of the great and moderate hopes of the West Bank. He died under suspicious circumstances in 2001. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (also known as Abu Mazen), like it or not, is a pragmatic, moderate, locally-born and raised Palestinian leader with a willingness to participate in a renewed peace process. To his critics and skeptics in the U.S., I would simply say, be careful of casting sand in the faces of moderates. Abbas is a proven, long-standing, willing participant in peace negotiations, as the lead Palestinian negotiator in the Oslo process, and the co-author of the Beilin-Abu Mazen Document.

As a specialist in the region, it is my observation that, among Palestinians, there are five sets of constituencies, only some of which receive attention among international negotiating parties. It is the first three or four in the list who, in my opinion, should be the most important as subjects of and participants in any peace negotiations:

1. Palestinians in the West Bank
2. Palestinians in Gaza
3. Local Palestinian citizens of Israel

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4. Palestinian inhabitants of refugee camps
5. Diaspora and/or expat Palestinians

If I could say two things to Donald Trump in regard to the peace process, it would be this: those who argue that local Palestinians are somehow illegitimate (or collaborators!) and need not be addressed have it exactly wrong. Any peace process has to be, ultimately, about local populations. In the Palestinian case, that means that it must be *about local Palestinians on both sides of the Green Line and their quality of life*. Local Palestinians on both sides of the Green Line are educated, organized, and are highly able to govern themselves. Local Palestinians – be they in Haifa, Nablus, or Gaza City – can well speak for themselves. Diaspora and expats do not represent them as well as they represent themselves.

Second, it is the grassroots that decides whether there is peace or not in the Middle East. One need only look at the Arab Spring to understand this point. When I lived for a summer with a Christian family in Birzeit Village in the West Bank in the mid-1990s, there was still hope in the midst of the Oslo process. My most potent observation was the impact of Martial Law on the freeways and main transportation arteries of the West Bank vis-à-vis the everyday lives of the *law abiding* among the local populations. The Wye River Memorandum, which was followed in the failure of Camp David II, maintained Israeli control of major transportation arteries across the West Bank. That sounded reasonable and necessary to Israeli security concerns. Arafat, who was likely not as skilled as necessary to the task in any case, said that he could not take the proposal back to his population. He was not wrong. For the everyday, grassroots, *law abiding* parts of the population, like it or not, continuing to be subject to Martial Law any time they entered a major road meant, functionally, no change in their daily lives. It meant, for most people, that they would still be living in a State of War. A State of War, I was told many times, is not peace – by definition. One of the most basic principles of administration is that governing authorities cannot consistently offend the rights and sensibilities of the *law abiding* within a population. Law abiding citizens must be the support base. Authorities who do not respect this basic fact end almost without exception in revolution and/or revolt; it is only a matter of how long until you get there (be it 100 years, 50 years, or 5 months). Support of the *law abiding* population should be our focus; let that population govern its own criminals/radicals, just as we do ours. Local populations are most effective at this, as we always know ourselves better than do outsiders.

I do not suggest that the how-to of this problematic is easy: how to respect the basic needs of *law abiding* Palestinians to *live in peace*, as well as Israel's legitimate security needs? But it is to this problem that the great minds the Trump administration should be addressing their collective brain power – *with local Palestinians* and local Israeli leaders as participants in the discussions.

About the author:

Dr. Patricia Sohn, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Florida. She is co-editor of *Beyond the Death of God: Religion in 21st Century International Politics*, (University of Michigan Press 2022); and author of *Judicial Power and National Politics: Courts and Gender in the Religious-Secular Conflict in Israel* (SUNY Press 2017 and 2008).