

# The Burden of History in the Middle East Peace Process

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Abdulla Aljunaid is a Bahraini writer and political researcher. He is a founding member of the National Unity Assembly and head of the Policy and Analysis Unit. Aljunaid is also a founding member of the National Gathering and an activist in the field of national reconciliation.



### Brief Analysis

**R**oy Kays, from the Israeli channel KAN 11 TV, wasn't the first Israeli journalist to contact me about Middle Eastern politics. However, he was the first to use a Twitter account to do so. After several exchanges of "How are you?" and "I'm fine Roy Kays, how are you?" it seemed that Roy had finally overcome concerns of rejection from my part and asked if we could "chat." Roy was one of the journalists who had accompanied the Israeli Prime Minister on his surprise visit to the Omani capital; he was interested in investigating the direct relations, or rather the possibility of direct relations, between GCC countries and Israel.

Israelis often overuse the word "friend" when speaking in Arabic with Arabs, perhaps out of a personal desire to overcome the political history between the two or perhaps because, like us, Israelis are exhausted, mentally if not politically, by the duration of this conflict. After agreeing to participate in the report Roy was working on, I answered his first question: "What do you think about normalizing relations between Israel and GCC countries? And what do you think of Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to Oman?" My participation was conditioned upon having my own opinion of Netanyahu being included in the report. As far as I am concerned, the Prime Minister does not possess the qualifications of a leader and is too busy establishing a political legacy to effectively make progress on bringing peace to Israel.

As for Roy's interest in my opinion, it may have stemmed from the attention I received in Arab media after telling RT Arabic on the eve of Netanyahu's visit to Muscat that "GCC countries do not need anyone's permission to make a decision to establish direct relations with Israel or any other State if such a decision serves our national interests."

Perhaps it is time that Palestinians and Israelis gave young people like Roy Kays interested in investigating direct relations a chance, because only they can move past a legacy that was not of their making. However, Israelis must not confuse this potential openness with the acceptance of an immoral occupation of one people by another. Therefore, all obstacles facing the peoples of this region must be removed, and they must be removed now.

Diplomacy in the Gulf has effectively helped Europe understand just how vital the objective role it plays is, and perhaps the time has come to deal with Israel directly when it comes to peace in the Middle East. Exploring this issue more directly is also important since the political climate in Washington is no longer purely political. The reason Washington's efforts have failed to make any progress in this specific matter is not a lack of political willpower but rather the murky policy making process, resulting from the interests of lobby groups interfering in the issue. Also,

our excessive historical reliance on Washington to manage this problem is another reason for this failure.

From a policy perspective, successive U.S. administrations have viewed the Middle East as a region burdened with a painful history whose wounds cannot be healed because most of the causes are religious. I would agree, to a certain extent, with Americans' prognosis on many issues. There is indeed a failure on our part to deal with the inherently selective American political memory, which tends to be short when it suits it the most. For this reason precisely, we must find the right incentives to market an Arab-Israeli peace initiative away from Washington.

Progress on a peace initiative would also pressure the United States into reviewing the level of priority it places on bilateral and strategic relations with all its Middle Eastern allies, hopefully leading to relations more clearly founded on common interests. This type of reappraisal would help sustain stability in the region.

In contrast, having the matter of a peace initiative tossed from one administration to the other has not and will not help end this crisis that has been going on for over 70 years. Moreover, Israel's peace deals with the major countries in its vicinity has eliminated the existential threat from its Arab neighbors as an excuse.

Both historical and doctrinal heritage are considered the key challenge to achieving the desired peace and stability in this region. Therefore, it is incumbent on us to neutralize that legacy, even if temporarily, to realize a better future. As for those who claim to represent God's will in this land, their references to history have no relevance to the present and do not reflect future challenges; this is a history that perpetuates violence and hatred. Right-wing religious movements in this region are all the same, including the radical Israeli right. They operate in a place burdened by its history of intolerance and its refusal to reconcile with history.

For those being misled by accusations that Gulf countries are rushing into normalization with Israel, I would warn against this type of slander perpetuated by parties who have failed to offer any real contribution to solving this problem. If Israelis are asked about the reasons human and cultural normalization has failed with countries like Egypt and Jordan even decades after peace agreements were signed, they would say it is due to a lack of popular will among Arabs, itself a result of a failure to achieve equal peace for everyone. This is why, when putting forward any new diplomatic efforts concerning this vital issue, we first need to rid ourselves of this legacy of the past, with all its stereotypes.

Moreover, both geographical and security challenges that we currently face, will take a different form in future and that will require building bridges of communication now. As the effects of climate change increase, and geostrategic balances become more fragile as a result, life cannot be sustained without finding solutions for water scarcity and food security.

Not only should this new diplomacy be pragmatic, but it should also be bold in leveraging whatever incentives it may possess, including diplomatic efforts made outside closed doors. For their part, Israelis must practice rationality when interpreting diplomatic messages from the Gulf. These messages essentially target the Israeli people in general and should not be read as attempts to woo the Israeli right, represented by Benjamin Netanyahu.

Arab Gulf countries should leverage all the political tools at their disposal to help restore stability in the Middle East, or even impose it if necessary. Throughout the past century, the Gulf region has been the biggest supporter of Palestinians, both politically and on a humanitarian level. However, today our responsibility means that our role does not end with political and humanitarian support: we can offer more to all parties concerned. ❖



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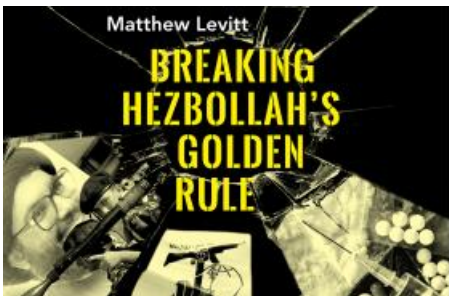
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