

# If Trump Wants the Ultimate Deal, He Must Not Repeat These Mistakes

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Articles & Testimony

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## Israeli-Palestinian peace is elusive because all of the parties, including the United States, have made a series of damaging but preventable errors.

**T**wenty-five years ago, the Oslo peace process was born. The process has endured, but it has failed to produce peace between Israelis and Palestinians. During that time, three efforts—by U.S. Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama—sought to resolve the conflict. All failed.

Clinton sought to combine intense direct negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians with extensive U.S. involvement. The Bush administration's approach mostly involved the parties dealing directly with one another, with episodic involvement from the U.S. secretary of state. The Obama administration's involvement was led by the secretary of state, with minimal direct negotiations between the parties as John Kerry served as the go-between. Each of us played different roles under Obama; one of us was deeply engaged in a back channel during the first year of Kerry's efforts, and the other served as a member of the State Department's peace team during the formal talks.

We don't buy the argument that the United States is responsible for the lack of peace. Washington cannot make peace between two parties that are incapable of making it. If they lack the will and the means—and, as is the case today, they are divided by very wide gaps—even the best plan will fail. More important, the parties must own the

peace so they have the stake to stand up to the inevitable resistance they will face from their domestic rejectionists who can simply not give up their respective national mythologies.

That, however, is not an argument for the United States to remain passive or play no role. The U.S. role can provide cover, explanation, reassurance—and commitments, all of which make it easier for both sides to make hard decisions. Learning from Washington's past mistakes—as well as the past mistakes of the Israelis and Palestinians—can help in the peacemaking process and should inform the Trump administration's approach to the peace plan it intends to unveil at some point. The tendency to cast blame but assume no responsibility for why the process of peacemaking has failed is also a contributing factor to why 25 years after Oslo, there is still no peace.

What follows is an outline of the five main mistakes that the United States, the Palestinians, and the Israelis have made since the advent of the Oslo process.

## U.S. MISTAKES

**1. Clinton's inconsistency** | From the outset, during the Clinton administration, U.S. officials were not tough or consistent enough on Israeli settlement activity or on insisting that the Palestinians fulfill their security responsibilities. Settlement activity made the Palestinians feel powerless—a feeling that fed the need to prove they were not impotent in the face of Israeli actions and that reduced their incentive to fulfill their obligations on security. With security the key issue determining Israeli public support for peace, especially with a Palestinian leader so identified with terrorism, Washington should have been insistent with Yasser Arafat and made it clear that if he did not fulfill his responsibilities, the process would be put on hold, with the public explanation that it would not resume until the Palestinians acted. During these years, the Clinton administration would pressure and threaten Arafat but then resume the talks, too often explaining away Palestinian failures to act.

**2. Bush's hesitancy** | The Bush administration avoided peacemaking until late in its second term. Yes, it did support an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. However, for the most part, when it came to the West Bank, it allowed a vacuum to form. Even on Gaza, the hesitancy to play a broker's role led the administration to offer reassurances to then-Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon as part of Israel's withdrawal, while failing to insist that Palestinians assume security responsibilities during the process of Israeli withdrawal or committing to help the Palestinians do so on the ground.

**3. Obama's leniency toward Abbas** | With the Obama administration, the main mistake was never criticizing or holding the Palestinians accountable. Even when Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas did not respond to Obama's principles for ending the conflict after their meeting on March 17, 2014, the administration blamed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Israel's settlement policies—not Abbas's choice to walk away from negotiations, not his moves to internationalize the conflict at a sensitive moment, and not his unresponsiveness to Washington's proposed conflict-ending principles. Israel was seen as being strong, and the Palestinians as weak—therefore, the onus was always on Israel. Of course, the assessment of the relative strength and weakness of the two parties was correct, but that did not absolve the Palestinians of responsibility; such an approach allowed the Palestinians to avoid having to make any hard choices.

**4. Lack of grassroots peace-building** | No administration has placed sufficient focus on building peace from the ground up. Neither the Bush nor the Obama administration committed enough effort and resources to the bottom-up side of peacemaking, especially when Salam Fayyad was the Palestinian prime minister. The U.S. stake in showing that his way worked—the way of Palestinians assuming responsibility and building institutions—was huge. But the allure of the “ultimate deal” was too great, meaning the administration did not sufficiently push Netanyahu and then-Defense Minister Ehud Barak to ease movement of people and goods and allow the development of infrastructure projects, as well as let Abbas off the hook on issues like rule of law and corruption. If nothing else, this shows that the appeal of the ultimate deal is not unique to Donald Trump's presidency. Yes, there needs to be a top-

down approach that includes a vision or peace horizon, but it is bound to be more believable if what's happening on the ground leads to a virtuous cycle of reciprocal steps.

**5. Peace as an abstraction** | All U.S. administrations, including Trump's, have too often treated peace as an abstraction. If bold pronouncements or conferences are to be seen by ordinary Israelis and Palestinians as signaling a new day, then behaviors of both sides in words and deeds must be seen as changing, too. Palestinians might believe something has changed if Israel were to stop building outside of the existing settlement blocs—effectively signaling that Netanyahu's stated acceptance of the idea of a Palestinian state might be real. Similarly, Israelis would take Palestinians' commitment to peace more seriously if Palestinian Authority leaders showed that they would no longer legitimize violence against Israelis by ending the practice of paying the families of those who seek to kill Israelis.

## PALESTINIAN MISTAKES

**1. A branding error** | The Palestinian leadership has consistently defined peacemaking not as a reconciliation process but essentially as a decolonization process. This approach deprived the peace process of its allure in Israel. Israelis came to believe that the Palestinians wanted land and not peace. Ironically, this helped Israel's religious right at the ballot box, meaning that they did not have to make their arguments in terms of biblical patrimony of the land—they simply had to say the Palestinians had no interest in peace. Moreover, not defining a peace process as a reconciliation process had other consequences. It allowed the Palestinians to rationalize providing lifetime financial assistance to families of those who perpetrated violence against Israeli civilians—a practice that convinced Israelis that the Palestinians were continuing to incentivize violence. This perception, in turn, reinforced a growing Israeli consensus that they did not have a partner.

**2. The Second Intifada** | The intifada between 2000 and 2005 has held back the prospect of peace to this day. While a debate will be waged for years about whether Arafat deliberately sparked the Palestinian uprising following the Camp David talks in the summer of 2000—where the first truly serious effort to resolve the issues of borders, security, settlements, refugees, and Jerusalem took place—it is indisputable that he made no real effort to stop it. About 4,000 Palestinians and 1,000 Israelis died in the Second Intifada. Beyond the tragic loss of life, the uprising discredited the Israeli peace camp, especially as the violence came in response to the most forthcoming government in Israel's history on the core questions of the conflict and after the rejection of the Clinton parameters by Arafat. Most Israelis felt if the Palestinians could not accept the Clinton proposal, they would never accept any peace initiative. The simple reality is that the Israeli political system never recovered.

**3. Fayyad's forced departure** | Abbas's decision to force the departure of Fayyad, his prime minister, in 2013 was also a mistake. Fayyad, who now teaches at Princeton University, was focused on creating the reality of Palestinian statehood through institution-building, professionalizing the security forces, fighting corruption, and forging the rule of law. Fayyad's idea of accountability won him international accolades and significant aid. Abbas resented the attention but also was unwilling to give up the patronage networks that Fayyad rightly saw as an obstacle to appointments based on capability and merit. The jettisoning of Fayyad demonstrated Abbas's lack of interest in effective and responsive governance.

**4. Abbas's missed opportunity** | Abbas did not reply to Obama and Kerry's proposal for resolving the conflict on March 17, 2014, at the White House. The proposal called for borders based on 1967 and mutually agreed swaps, for security arrangements that ensured Israel could fulfill its security needs on its own, for the refugee issue to be resolved in a way that did not alter the Jewish character of Israel, and for two capitals for two states in Jerusalem. To this day, Abbas has never given a response. His unresponsiveness and the absence of a counterproposal, unfortunately, reflects a pattern on the Palestinian side: Abbas never responded to then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's far-reaching offer in September 2008, which even included a provision for an international consortium to

govern the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif complex in Jerusalem. Abbas's failures to respond seem little different from Arafat's rejection of the Clinton parameters. Some Palestinians claim they were never given the principles in writing and therefore could not respond; this argument is wholly disingenuous because Palestinian negotiators pleaded with the administration not to put the proposal in writing because then it would have to go to all the PLO bodies. The common theme of these three failed efforts in 2000, 2007 to 2008, and 2013 to 2014 is the lack of a serious Palestinian counterproposal to U.S. or Israeli offers to end the conflict.

**5. More Abbas inaction** | Abbas didn't seize the opportunity to assume responsibility for border posts at the end of the conflict in Gaza in 2014 which lasted 51 days. Gazans suffered terribly, Hamas achieved nothing of substance, and Palestinians expected the PA to set up shop immediately in Gaza. At that moment, there was a hope among the Americans, Israelis, Egyptians, and Palestinians that the impasse created by the Hamas takeover of Gaza in 2007 would be ended. But Abbas refused to act.

## ISRAELI MISTAKES

**1. Ramping up settlement** | Israel promoted the settlement enterprise, and it has dramatically ballooned since Oslo. While Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin exhibited spectacular political courage in pursuing a peace deal, and paid for it with his life, he shied away from either freezing or even dramatically limiting settlement activity—a reality that made the Palestinians feel powerless. Clearly, Rabin never dreamed that settlers would outpace peace efforts, as the settlement population has grown from 100,000 in 1993 to over 400,000 now (not including the contested neighborhoods in East Jerusalem that Israel does not consider settlements). Yes, the geographic areas where the bulk of the settlers live (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/settlements-and-solutions>) in settlement blocs are inside the security barrier in the 8 percent of West Bank land that is largely adjacent to Israeli urban areas, meaning that the door is not yet shut to the two-state solution. However, with the current Israeli government refusing to curb settlement activity outside the barrier, the ability to maintain the possibility of separation from the Palestinians and a two-state option will increasingly diminish.

**2. Failure to support Fayyad's approach** | Between June 2007 and June 2013, Israel failed to take steps to show that Fayyad's approach worked and that Palestinians gained from it. A combination of habit and inertia on the one hand and settler opposition on the other probably accounts for the Israeli failure. With Israel impeding Palestinians' movement and commerce, failing to address the West Bank's water needs, and conducting raids into Area A, the 18.2 percent of the West Bank where the PA has civil and security responsibilities, Israeli actions made it difficult to show that Fayyad's way was working for Palestinians. (As noted above, this was also a mistake of the Bush and Obama administrations.)

**3. Netanyahu's dependence on the far-right** | In May 2016, Netanyahu got cold feet and did not conclude the deal he had worked out with Isaac Herzog to bring the center-left opposition into the government, which would have made it a broad-based coalition—one that would provide needed political backing for key concessions—rather than one dependent on right-wing and religious parties. President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi of Egypt and King Abdullah of Jordan met with Netanyahu and U.S. officials earlier that year, making clear that they would host a peace conference to set a new trajectory. However, coalition members of Netanyahu's government insisted on building outside the blocs and outside the security barrier; Netanyahu did not stand up to them.

**4. Unwillingness to offer concessions** | Israeli governments have been too concerned about appearing to be *freiers* (suckers), insisting on getting something in return for anything that is given. But there are times when Israeli moves can be an investment in the future by empowering those Palestinians trying to do the right thing. Israeli reluctance to allow water or a road to connect to the new city of Rawabi was a classic example of this, impeding the development of the city by several years. The new city, designed eventually to have 22 neighborhoods, already has around 4,000 people living there; it has a high-tech and commercial sector, and decent, environmentally sound housing—all with

the aim of creating the reality of middle-class living for Palestinians. This is clearly an Israeli interest; why, then, make it harder? Israel's impediments had nothing to do with security and everything to do with the belief that they should do nothing for Palestinians so long as the PA tries to put Israel on the defensive internationally—or fails to give Israel a concession on another issue.

**5. No sales pitch for peace** | Netanyahu does not use his bully pulpit in Israel to convince Israeli citizens that separation with Palestinians is not a favor to Palestinians, but rather crucial for Israel if it wants to maintain a democratic and Jewish state. Netanyahu has said both publicly and privately that Israel will not become a binational state—and yet his policies are leading in that direction. He could at least emphasize to the Israeli public his commitment to preventing such an outcome. Instead, he uses his formidable power of persuasion to essentially convince Israelis that they are living in a post-conflict society and that finding a resolution to the conflict is not an existential question for Israel.

One can only hope that the Trump administration can learn from the errors of the past—both Washington's and those of the two parties. The White House is clearly making one mistake already: It has reached out to Israelis and done exactly the opposite with the Palestinians. Peacemaking is not a morality play where one side is all right and the other all wrong. Palestinian expectations do need to be more realistic, and Palestinians must address issues with an eye toward bridging differences and not scoring points—and the administration was right to recognize that. But the administration's recent steps—moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, cutting the budget of a very problematic United Nations Relief and Works Agency to zero without announcing an alternative institutional mechanism to meet Palestinian refugees' real humanitarian needs, cutting aid to hospitals, closing the PLO office in Washington—all display a consistent policy of ignoring Palestinian needs and concerns. It will not make a people whose narrative is one of defiance and victimization more likely to respond—nor will it make Arab leaders more likely to sign on to a peace plan when it is finally presented.

That peace plan and its presentation and implementation are more likely to be successful if it takes into account the lessons from the past—and the acknowledgment of wrong-headed moves by all sides. Understanding the mistakes of the past is a first step toward shaping a different future.

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*Foreign Policy*

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