

# Arab Leaders Need to Play a More Prominent Role on Peace-Making Than They Ever Have Before

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**By securing regional buy-in for a new peace plan before making it public, Washington has a much better chance of getting the Palestinians back to the negotiating table.**

**P**resident Trump calls making a peace agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians the “ultimate deal.” He prides himself on being a deal-maker and believes somehow that he may yet produce that ultimate deal. Jared Kushner, his son-in-law, and Jason Greenblatt, who worked as an attorney in the Trump real estate business, have been charged by the president with putting together a peace plan.

A few months ago when they briefed the UN Security Council members on their approach and the status of the plan, they emphasized that Israelis, Palestinians, and Arabs would love parts of it and hate parts of it. Fair enough, no plan that is credible can please or address only the needs of one side. By definition, no peace plan can succeed unless it addresses the needs of both sides.

What has made this such a difficult conflict to resolve is that there are two “rights” and not a right and a wrong in this conflict. Those two “rights” have to be reconciled. We are dealing with two national movements competing for the same space. Inevitably the conflict came to be defined in zero-sum terms, with a win for one side always being seen as a loss for the other. The idea that both could win has been difficult to accept. A case in point is the Trump decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and to move the embassy. Even though Trump said that he was not recognizing the boundaries of Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem because those needed to be negotiated, the decision was portrayed as an Israel win and a Palestinian loss. So much so that Mahmoud Abbas cut off all official contact with the Trump administration and said it could no longer be the sole mediator.

That has not deterred the Trump administration and it continues to say it will present its plan at some point. With no real contact with official Palestinians, the president needs Arab leaders to play a more prominent role on peace-making than they ever have before. In saying this, I do not mean to suggest that Arab leaders can take the place of Palestinians. They cannot. But they can do something they have not done before: they can declare whether a proposal or plan is credible and meets the national aspirations of the Palestinian people in a dignified way.

Historically, the position of the Arab leaders, who accept a peaceful outcome and the principle of two states for two peoples, has been to say that they can accept whatever the Palestinians can accept. The problem has been that the Palestinian national movement has been led by those who find it difficult to accept specific proposals for resolving the conflict. As someone who helped to draft the Clinton Parameters in 2000, I know that at the time Arab leaders quietly urged Arafat to accept them.

But all this was done quietly. I was hosted at a dinner a few months ago by a number of Palestinians, including some I had negotiated with, and they lamented how different everything today would be if Arafat had said yes. He did not. No one in the Arab world staked out a public position. No leaders said that while the decision was a Palestinian one, these parameters were credible and met Palestinian national rights. History might have been rewritten if someone had done so.

Is it possible that things could be different this time? Given the weakness and division of the Palestinians, and Abbas' rejection of the Trump Administration, it seems clear that whatever the Trump peace plan turns out to be, the Palestinian instinct will be to say no to it. Arab leaders might be able to affect the Palestinian position if they were in a position to say that the plan was credible and worthy of discussion.

Of course, they could only say this if the plan was credible. For Arab leaders, at a minimum, the plan must address Palestinian national needs, both in terms of viable borders for the state and a capital in Arab part of East Jerusalem. Presumably, the Trump Administration will go over the plan—not generalities about it but its specifics—with key Arab leaders before presenting it. The president should know what the response is going to be before presenting it, and his peace team should work out the language of what will be said about the plan in advance so there are no surprises.

By rejecting President Carter's Camp David Accords and the subsequent autonomy talks, the Palestinians lost an opportunity to stop additional Israeli settlement building; in 1980, in talks mediated by Ambassador Sol Linowitz, the Israelis agreed that one of the powers of the Palestinian Interim Self-Governing Authority would be a veto over new uses of land in the West Bank and Gaza. At the time, Israel had less than 5000 settlers. With 300,000 settlers today in the lands outside of Jerusalem, it is not hard to see what the Palestinians lost by foregoing this opportunity. And, obviously, saying no to Bill Clinton has left the Palestinians far worse off.

Perhaps, Arab leaders today can serve Palestinian interests by going public and making it possible for Palestinians not to miss an opportunity if there is one. At this point, I don't know what is in the administration's peace plan; I don't know if it will meet a standard of credibility in Arab eyes. However, I do know that if it crosses a threshold of credibility, Arabs can best support the Palestinians by being open and saying that it does.

Rejection has not served the Palestinian cause. Arab support for that cause today might best be expressed by being honest with the Palestinians in private and in public.

*Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on the Majalla website (<http://eng.majalla.com/2018/06/article55256612/arab-leaders-need-to-play-a-more-prominent-role-on-peace-making-than-they-ever-have-before>). ❖*

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