

# The Road to Peace

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## Those who think the two-state solution is being buried should put their shovels away.

**D**iplomacy is often more art than science. For those who think otherwise, I would suggest that they watch the joint press conference that President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu held on Wednesday.

It was not carefully orchestrated. And it did not offer clear policy prescriptions or formulas. For those reasons, we should all be careful about drawing far-reaching conclusions.

I offer this cautionary note particularly because so many observers have been quick to conclude that the two-state outcome to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is now dead. They take Trump's unwillingness to express a preference between a two-state and one-state outcome, and Prime Minister Netanyahu's desire to speak of "substance," not "labels," and conclude that the objective of peace-making has now changed.

Perhaps that is right, but Trump also said he would accept whatever the parties can accept. What he was saying is: I will agree to whatever the sides will agree to.

Because that appeared to suggest that there might be an alternative to two states, and because Netanyahu is under pressure from his right wing to drop his acceptance of a Palestinian state, some are ready to conclude that two states as a policy is now dead and buried.

That may make those Israelis and Palestinians who oppose two states happy -- which is, itself, ironic because their visions of that state are very different. Still, before they each congratulate themselves on the end of the two-state paradigm, they should also consider the other points that Trump made.

First and foremost, he made it clear that he is committed to pursuing peace and that it is an important objective for

him. He spoke of both sides having to compromise, of Israel holding back on settlements for now, and, after the prime minister had raised the possibilities of working with the Arabs now, Trump embraced their role on peace. Indeed, on the latter, he seemed surprised that Netanyahu was raising at the press conference the role of the Arab partners and using a regional approach to embed the Palestinians in peace-making, but he warmed to this idea, emphasizing there could be a "big deal."

But this also brings us back to reality. It makes sense to see if the shared threat perceptions that have produced real, if low-visibility, cooperation on security between Israel and many of the Sunni Arab states can be translated into taking steps toward peace. Surely, there is value in testing what is possible, particularly with the weakness and division of the Palestinians making it hard for them to negotiate with Israel, much less concede anything.

What is unclear is how important peace-making is to the Arabs. How does it rank compared to the threats they see from Iran and the radical Sunni Islamists like the Islamic State group? Do they see the gains from being actively involved in peace-making and pushing the Palestinians to be worth the risks? And, if they involve themselves in such peace-making, what will they want from the Israelis in terms of concessions toward the Palestinians?

And here is the rub. If Arab states decide that engaging on the peace issue with Israel makes sense, they will want to show that they delivered for the Palestinians what they could not produce for themselves. They won't drop Palestinian demands, they will come to represent them.

The great irony may be that involving the Arabs is almost sure to ensure that there must be a two-state outcome if the effort is to lead anywhere. The Arab leaders cannot accept the Palestinians to be subsumed into an Israeli state.

The logic of drawing in the Arabs makes sense: Israeli-Arab cooperation, even if it is below the radar screen, is an important new development in the region. It represents an asset for the Trump administration as it thinks about how to counter Iran and the Islamic State group and contemplates what to do on peace.

In another irony, the desire of the Egyptians, Jordanians, Saudis, Emirates and others to have the U.S. engaged in the region and ready to exert its power against their enemies may give them an incentive to be responsive to the Trump desire to have them play a role on peace. But that will not obviate their need to produce for the Palestinians.

It may be difficult to produce a two-state outcome anytime soon. But those who think that the two-state solution is now being buried should put their shovels away.

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*U.S. News & World Report*

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