

The Arab-Israeli Peace Process is More Important Now than Ever

by [Dani Tahrawi \(/experts/dani-tahrawi\)](#)

Apr 22, 2016

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/mlyt-alslam-byn-alrb-wasrayl-hy-akthr-ahmyt-alan-mn-ay-wqt-mdy\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Dani Tahrawi \(/experts/dani-tahrawi\)](#)

Dani Tahrawi has served as the editor-in-chief of the Iraq Monitor since 2014.



Articles & Testimony

April 22, 2016

In the 1990s and early 2000s, American media referred to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the “Middle East Peace Process,” a testament to the positive political developments achieved in Wye River and Oslo under the stewardship of former President Bill Clinton. President Clinton, a self-declared “honest-broker,” took calculated measures to address the grievances of both parties. He even came within inches of brokering a final-status agreement and cited “procrastination” rather than substantive policy disagreements as the main reason why the talks eventually broke down.

When George W. Bush built on Clinton’s momentum, almost hammering out key concessions from hawkish Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and a stubborn Palestinian delegation, success seemed more promising than ever. Yet a sudden series of unrelated events, most prominently the terrorist attacks of 9/11, pushed the “peace-process” ball away from the United States into the hands of Saudi Arabia and King Abdullah. They too attempted the peace process, offering Israel peace with the Arabs in exchange for full Israeli withdrawal from the Occupied Territories. But the bitter aftermath of the Camp David talks coupled with mutual mistrust doomed the peace initiative, making it likely that neither side will engage in talks unless both Israeli and Palestinian politics experience political breakthroughs.

Now, foreign backing, the greatest driving force in past talks, is absent. Both the United States and Arab countries are preoccupied managing bitter intra-Arab conflicts that have resulted in thousands of casualties in the past half-decade. The world’s unofficial policy for conflict resolution prioritizes the bloodiest conflicts first, leaving the Israeli-Arab conflict a second-rate concern.

Yet the conflict is more present than ever, shaping the powerful propaganda machines of groups partaking in regional wars. The Houthi movement fighting Yemeni pro-government forces uses Iran’s infamous “Death to America, death to Israel” chant on their official flag. Hezbollah, one of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad’s main allies, has fought several wars against Israel and continues to mobilize new and existing followers through powerful anti-Israeli rhetoric. Conversely, reaching a peaceful settlement in the Arab-Israeli conflict would strip Iran of its most prevalent excuse for providing material and financial support to terrorist groups that both oppose Israel’s

existence and wage intra-Arab proxy wars throughout the region.

Clearly, the Israel-Arab conflict and the region's sectarian wars are linked, and a solution to the former might provide a breakthrough to the latter. Yet recent efforts to solve the Israeli-Arab conflict have flopped because the peace process offers few incentives to Palestinians and Israelis alike.

For Palestinians, Benjamin Netanyahu's intransigence over Jerusalem, refugees, and final borders has left them frustrated and increasingly pessimistic about any attempts to negotiate. Moreover, Palestinians are internally divided politically, and neither Hamas nor the Palestinian Authority (PA) has the appetite for a political breakthrough. Current PA President Mahmoud Abbas is more concerned with protecting his legacy than solving the conflict and Hamas is obsessed with maintaining its business and security monopoly over Gaza.

The situation is even more complicated in Israel. Israeli security and defense experts argue that settlement blocs and the Golan Heights must be retained to protect Israel's borders with the West Bank, Syria, and Lebanon. For some Israeli politicians, the status quo is manageable as long as Hamas does not acquire sophisticated rockets, leaving Israelis much more focused on the potential drawbacks of negotiations than the very real benefits of a lasting peace.

However, the major obstacle causing interest in negotiations to falter on both sides is the outdated guiding framework of the peace process -- land for peace. Essentially, the tried-and-failed land-for-peace formula cannot work effectively with the current political realities that have developed over the last twelve years. However, replacing this outdated method with a feasible, multilateral international initiative driven by both Arab states' and Israel's serious strategic concerns regarding Iran, along with America's evolving strategic relationship with Israel could lead to a strong coalition to confront Iran's attempted regional hegemony and a path towards negotiations built on trust developed in other quarters.

During the bitter years of the Cold War, the United States came to view Israel as a bulwark against expanding Soviet influence in Arab countries and a deterrent force should Arabs attempt to block key oil-trading routes. Today's situation is quite different: despite Putin's recent attempts to reassert Russian influence into the Middle East, it is limited to its traditional power base in Syria. Major oil producing nations—mainly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates—have crucial and unbreakable military and economic alliances with the United States. A completely different test of wills has already upended stability in the region, and America should strive to foster a united Arab-Israeli alliance against Iranian proxies, more serious than ever as Iran moves towards sophisticated ballistic missiles.

In previous peace efforts, the United States made significant headway through extraordinary diplomatic efforts and fostering close relationships with the Palestinian leadership. Today, the full spectrum of the Palestinian political landscape remains obscured to American diplomats overstretched in solving other conflicts. This only further emphasizes that peace negotiations are best conducted under the auspices of the United States but with the understanding that effective teamwork and communication among all regional parties works best. This will be a serious challenge; one of the most serious consequences of U.S. disengagement from the Israeli-Arab conflict has been its effects on Palestinian leadership. With little change and no clear plan for improvement in the West Bank, Many Palestinians now see Mahmoud Abbas and his deputies as corrupt and passive. Quite frankly, it will be impossible to broker a lasting peace without cultivating a new generation of moderate and effective Palestinian leaders that can negotiate on behalf of their people. In this scenario, other Arab states may be more effective navigators of the Palestinian political climate than the West.

While the emotional toll of this extended conflict would take many years to heal even after successful negotiations, all sides would immediately benefit from the practical aspects of political cooperation. Israel and the rest of the region could effectively develop a more robust regional economy, aided significantly by a regionally active GCC.

Impressive Israeli scientific know-how could help Arab countries more efficiently rebuild their infrastructures. Increasingly coordinated security and rehabilitated image of Israel would remove one facet of the complex proxy wars with Iran that are conducted under the pretext of harming Israel, removing a major source of legitimation for these proxy fighters.

As the United Nations recently reported, the consequences of continuing to disassociate from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could be dire. This assessment highlights the consequences of the ongoing conflict and warns that “the two-state solution is in danger,” and that “over 900,000 refugees would need humanitarian aid in 2016.” The bleak assessment of the direction of the Middle East Peace Process is an indirect appeal to world powers that a return to the negotiating table is the only way to avert what could be the complete economic collapse of Gaza and the spread of jihadi militias seeking “martyrdom” in a “holy war” with Israel.

These are serious and timely concerns that can be realistically addressed with thought and effort. And in light of the current situation, it seems improbable that peace could be brokered between the Israelis and Palestinians without addressing the larger Arab-Israeli grievances and sectarian issues.

Dani Tahrawi has served as the editor-in-chief of the Iraq Monitor since 2014. This item was originally published on the Fikra website (<http://fikraforum.org/?p=9224&lang=en#.Vx3WBvkrLIU>). ❖

Fikra Forum

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

TOPICS

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](/policy-analysis/peace-process)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](/policy-analysis/israel)

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](/policy-analysis/palestinians)