

OSLO AT 25: LOOKING AHEAD

The Myth of “Failed” Peace

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The much-maligned Middle East peace process has been a great success from the U.S. perspective. If we hold fast to its founding principles, its best days are yet to come.

The Middle East peace process is about to take a few knocks. Late-night comedians, cable news commentators, and numberless think tank pundits are sure to pounce on the 25th anniversary of the signing on the White House lawn of the Oslo Accords, the founding document of Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking, to pillory the peace process. They will call it a failure, an embarrassment, an irrelevancy, and a waste of presidential time and energy. In so doing they will join other Oslo detractors now accumulated over the years.¹¹

Despite this, the eighth President in a row says he is readying a new plan to achieve Arab-Israeli peace—or, as he calls it, the “deal of the century.” If past is prologue, his effort will fall short. Nevertheless, chances are likely his successor—and his successor’s successor—will try again. This recidivist violation of the common-sense definition of insanity is part of what earns the Middle East peace process widespread derision. But the ridicule is misplaced. The truth is that the Middle East peace process, marshaled largely under U.S. aegis, has been a resounding success. Indeed, it is one of the most effective American foreign policies of the past half-century. And its best time may be yet to come.

It is important to recall the original rationale that motivated Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger to navigate the final stages of the October 1973 Arab-Israel War in such a way that a U.S.-led diplomatic gambit—which soon earned the label “peace process”—filled the gap left by the failed United Nations-focused effort of previous years. They had three interlocking goals:

- to offer Arabs and Israelis a diplomatic alternative to armed conflict;
- to solve the strategic quandary of having two sets of pro-Western states—the Jewish state of Israel and the conservative Arab monarchies—on opposite sides of a regional war;
- to offer Moscow’s Middle East allies a reason to shift into America’s strategic orbit, thereby shrinking and ultimately sidelining Soviet influence throughout the area.

The strategy they pursued was to devise an incremental approach to peacemaking, eschewing a go-for-broke effort to forge peace by focusing instead on step-by-step measures. At its core was a novel idea: Success would not come from being an impartial, third-party mediator but rather an honest broker whose close political affinity for one of the sides (in this case, Israel) would be an asset to peacemaking, not a liability. As soon as America began playing the role of honest broker—helping the parties by reducing the risk of dangerous concessions and providing vital inducements of economic aid, military support and strategic backing—progress was made. And as soon as one Arab party, in this case Egypt, saw that America could deliver what it needed *because* of its close relations with Israel—both in terms of Israeli concessions as well as critical direct assistance—other Arab parties soon wanted to get into the game.^[21]

Eventually, by every measure, the peace process achieved its original goals and more. First, most of the Arab states and Israel have not only embraced a diplomatic alternative to conflict but effectively renounced war as a way to resolve their differences. The October 1973 War was the last inter-state war between Arabs and Israelis; since then, Israel has faced a range of regional adversaries but they have either been Arab sub-state actors and terrorist groups (Lebanese Hezbollah, Palestinian Hamas, and the Arab-led ISIS) or the non-Arab Islamic Republic of Iran.

Second, both Arab states and Israel have forged much closer ties with the United States over the forty years since the dawn of the modern peace process, building strategic partnerships with Washington that extend to all levels of diplomatic, military, and intelligence relations. Some of those Arab states have even developed important, if quiet, ties with Israel.

Finally, with the rise of the U.S.-led peace process, two historic allies of Moscow before 1973—Egypt and the Palestine Liberation Organization—gradually moved into the American camp. The result was that the Soviets and then the Russians were relegated to bit players in the Middle East for a generation, only re-gaining a measure of influence as a result of U.S. decisions

in Syria during the Obama and Trump Administrations that had nothing to do with Middle East peacemaking.

What about the fourth goal of the Middle East peace process—peace? Here, too, U.S. diplomacy has been surprisingly successful. Later this month, Egypt and Israel will celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Camp David Accords, which defined the framework for subsequent peace treaties signed under U.S. auspices. While their relationship has often been chilly, it is warmer today—at least on the official level—than at any time since Anwar Sadat’s assassination in October 1981.

Next month, Jordan and Israel mark a quarter century since a breakthrough White House meeting between then-Crown Prince Hassan bin Talal and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, which set the stage for a peace treaty reached under the American President’s watchful eye in the Arava desert the following year. These neighbors also enjoy very close strategic, military, and intelligence relations, even if hopes for cultural ties and deep people-to-people connections have not yet been realized.

With Syria, the other major belligerent on Israel’s border, a formal peace has remained elusive. Nevertheless, the 1974 disengagement agreement brokered by Kissinger survived war, revolution, and a flood of refugees. For more than forty years, the Golan border has been among the quietest in the Middle East.

The big picture is remarkable. With the exception of the frontier between Israel and Lebanon, where Hezbollah has captured the state and remains on active war-footing, an entire generation of Arabs and Israelis has grown up knowing nothing but peace and quiet along all of Israel’s international borders.

What about peace between Israelis and Palestinians, the so-called core of the conflict? Even in retrospect, it made sense for American presidents and local leaders to focus on resolving the interstate conflict—which could produce not only regional war but superpower confrontation—before turning to the more complex, more emotional inter-communal conflict between two peoples wrestling for control over the same land. But by the time they did fix their sights on the Israeli-Palestinian problem, the world had changed.

On the one hand, the very success of interstate diplomacy reduced the strategic urgency of solving the narrower conflict. This was brought home during the second Palestinian uprising, a violent, bloody period from 2000 to 2004 that took unprecedented numbers of Israeli and Palestinian lives but, importantly,

did not attract the intervention of a single Arab state.¹³¹ The lesson was clear: The Israeli-Palestinian conflict was now reduced to a local issue, one that had potentially painful outcomes for Israelis and Palestinians but from which all other regional parties had decided to stay away.

On the other hand, a larger, a more menacing threat had come to occupy the attention of both American and regional leaders: the fear of violent Sunni jihadism. While the *intifada* flared, bin Laden launched his brazen 9/11 attack against the United States, eventually triggering America's two longest wars and setting in motion a global conflict that is still raging. This threat further diminished the strategic importance of an already marginal local conflict, as policymakers pivoted to Afghanistan and Iraq.

In this environment, what is remarkable is not the setbacks Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking suffered but the considerable successes it achieved. To some, this claim strains credulity; after all, a quarter century after the famous handshake between Israel's Yitzhak Rabin and the Palestine Liberation Organization's Yasser Arafat, leaders of the two sides are not even on speaking terms. But that political breach masks a deeper, more enduring strategic reality: Not only is the quasi-government created by the Oslo Accords—the Palestinian Authority—a reasonably well-functioning entity (certainly by regional standards), it conducts relations with Israel that are more peaceful, cooperative, and mutually beneficial than many other cross-border relationships in the Middle East. Consider the following:

- According to the World Bank's World Development Indicators, the Palestinian territories have a per capita gross national income (measured in purchasing power parity) that exceeds Honduras and Ghana, is about on par with Nigeria, Moldova, Pakistan, Nicaragua, and the Marshall Islands, and even approaches Vietnam. It has infant mortality rates lower than Morocco; child malnutrition rates lower than Turkey; and a youth literacy rate on par with Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. At 104 on the most recent global listing of the World Happiness Index, the Palestinian territories came in ahead of Tunisia (111) and Egypt (122), let alone such war-torn Arab countries as Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. While much poorer than Israel, a world-class economy, the Palestinian territories are well within the development spectrum for non-oil-exporting Arab states. (To be sure, these achievements are thanks in no small part due to the enormous sums of development assistance, foreign aid, and UN Relief and Works Agency spending directed toward Palestinians over the decades, especially since the 1993 Oslo Accords.)

- Despite Israel’s security barrier and numerous military checkpoints, the border between Israel and the PA is not nearly the hermetically sealed cage it is widely thought to be. About 80,000 Palestinians work in Israel every day, half with legal working papers and half with Israeli authorities looking the other way, making this a much more permeable frontier, relative to population, than such closed or severely limited borders as between Morocco and Algeria; Libya and Tunisia; Syria and Jordan; Saudi Arabia and Yemen; and, especially, the locked-and-barricaded borders between Gaza, on one side, and Egypt and Israel on the others. When salaries to Palestinian workers in Israel are included, direct Israeli-Palestinian trade sums to about \$6 billion, making this one of the most active borders in terms of regulated trade in the region.
- Even in terms of security, the Israel-PA relationship deserves to be recognized for its positive achievement. A review of the U.S. State Department’s annual terrorism reports indicates that the total number of Israelis killed by terrorists originating in PA-administered West Bank territory over the ten-year period from 2007 to 2016 was, at most, 70. (Since official statistics are not presented in this fashion, this cumulative figure was derived from details in the reports; any inaccuracies are not likely to alter the magnitude of the finding.) While that is 70 too many, it amounts to about one fifth of the number of homicides that the city of Baltimore suffered *in just one year* (343 in 2017). It is widely understood that this level of relative security is a function of four factors: Israel’s security barrier; operations of Israeli military, security and intelligence forces in the area; operations of Palestinian military security and intelligence forces; and cooperation/coordination between the Israeli and Palestinian forces. Take away any of those pillars and the entire structure collapses.

None of this is meant to minimize the virulently anti-peace component of PA public policy, such as its system of financial payments to terrorists and their families, or to sidestep the formidable governance issues facing the PA, from mismanagement to corruption. Similarly, none of this is meant to overlook Israeli actions that have severely complicated further diplomatic progress, including restrictions on legitimate economic activity in Palestinian areas and the expansion of Israel’s civilian presence (that is, settlements) east of the security barrier. All these issues merit intense scrutiny and urgent remedial action. Rather, the key point is to put the PA in the proper regional context.

By that measure, the PA functions about as well as any new Middle Eastern “state” could expect to function, providing levels of satisfaction and security—to its people and to its closest neighbor—on par with other regional states. (Compare, for example, the PA’s experience of relative peace and stability to

the seven years since South Sudan became independent.) Setting aside the sad story of Gaza, warped since June 2007 by the destructive control of Hamas, the nearly 15 years since the end of the second Palestinian uprising have witnessed a lengthy period of underappreciated calm, predictability, and relative normalcy in the West Bank. This experience is especially notable given the extent to which the PA's powers and authorities are circumscribed by the complex web of legal, security and other practical ties with Israel.

All of which brings us to the wisdom and efficacy of American peacemaking efforts and, specifically, to three questions:

- Do the repeated unsuccessful efforts of successive Presidents, Republican and Democratic, to achieve a final resolution of this conflict tell us that peace really isn't possible?
- If Israeli-Palestinian peace has dramatically less strategic urgency than it once did, should the United States still commit time and effort to achieving it?
- If the United States decides that achieving peace is both possible and advantageous to American interests, what should the current Administration do that previous ones have not done?

Is peace possible? If peace is defined as a new agreement between the PLO and Israel that defines borders between Israel and a future Palestinian entity, the various powers and authorities the latter will enjoy, and the substance of bilateral relations, the answer is undoubtedly yes. (The entity will be universally and appropriately recognized as a "state" even if, through its founding documents, it agrees to give up certain aspects of sovereignty enjoyed by most states.)

The historical record suggests that nothing makes it impossible for the leaders of the PLO and Israel to reach such an agreement: not the purposeful settlement of large numbers of Israeli civilians in communities within the West Bank, often with the stated intent to prevent such an agreement; not the shameful record of Palestinian political, religious, and civic leaders inciting anti-Israel and anti-Jewish hatred and even violence; not the internal political divisions within the Palestinian world; and not the substantial shifts in American policy toward key aspects of the Palestinian issue in recent years. Indeed, the lesson of history is that when Arab and Israeli leaders are determined to change realities and reach agreements, no obstacles are too high to overcome. The Oslo Accords themselves exemplify this truth: At their origins, the Accords were negotiated by bypassing then-existing U.S. mediation efforts and were approved by

surmounting considerable domestic opposition among both Israelis and Palestinians.

Some have argued that the sheer number of Israeli settlers who currently reside outside the West Bank security barrier—approximately 97,000—constitutes an insurmountable obstacle to future peacemaking.^[4] Of course, no one can predict precisely how future peace negotiators will address questions of borders, settlements, and legal residency outside one's country of origin; nor can one presume to know precisely how many settlers will opt to remain in their homes in the event the democratically elected government of Israel calls on them to leave. But the past does provide some guide.

In the history of the peace process, two governments of Israel—both led by domineering Prime Ministers on the political Right—overcame ideological resistance and the organized opposition of settlers to evacuate substantial numbers of civilians from territory slated for transfer to full Arab control. This was the case in 1982, when Israel completed its withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula after removing 14 settlements, including the large town of Yamit, and then again in 2005, when Israel removed more than 8,000 settlers from 21 settlements in the Gaza Strip and the northern West Bank, handing those areas to the Palestinians. Seeing the forced relocation of Jews from settlements built at the instigation of successive Israeli governments was a gut-wrenching experience for many Israelis, even those who supported the decision as essential for Israel's larger national security. But that did not stop Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon from implementing those decisions. The lesson here is that while the numbers matter, the commitment and determination of Israel's leadership matter more.

This assertion about the continued possibility of peace, even in the face of major obstacles, has two important implications.

First, it means that the Cassandras are wrong; the moment for peacemaking has not passed. It may not even have arrived.

Second, it means Palestinian and Israeli leaders will reach a new agreement if and when they conclude that the status quo is unacceptable for them both—politically, strategically, morally. At that point, the key missing ingredient will be leadership, the uncanny but essential ability to bring along a majority of one's constituents while also projecting sympathy for one's domestic adversaries. This is not a simple matter. It is possible that Israeli and Palestinian leaders will reach that conclusion individually but not together; and it is equally possible that they reach that conclusion but one or both will lack the leadership skills to translate it into practical action. An inescapable fact is that the while the

potential for peaceful change is real, the potential for lost opportunities is real, too.

(In the event the two sides are not synchronized as to when they both recognize the urgency for action and choose leaders capable of making that happen, unilateral action by one of the parties to improve its own situation is a distinct possibility. This could include, for example, an Israeli decision to withdraw civilian settlers inside the security barrier, without any compensating agreement with the Palestinians, similar to how Sharon opted to disengage from Gaza. This would not produce peace, as such, but it would change the calculus for the two sides, perhaps making further progress more likely in the future. In this case, the United States may have an important role to play with just one of the parties, helping to reduce risks and limit costs.)

At the current moment, it does not appear that the two sides view their existing relationship as so painful, burdensome, and unbearable that they wish to exchange it for something else. If Palestinian leaders truly considered their situation untenable, they would have taken advantage of any number of opportunities presented by successive U.S. Presidents to propose practical alternatives, or at least to respond constructively to U.S. and Israeli ideas about alternatives.

One can make a parallel case about Israelis, which usually resolves around the “unsustainability” argument—the idea that trying to maintain the current situation indefinitely will force Israel to eventually choose between its Jewish character or its democratic character, a choice so unpalatable that Israel would be better off taking the initiative to resolve the situation now. In fact, the current situation is eminently sustainable, as the history of the past half-century has shown, and there is evidence that it is growing even more sustainable as Arab states signal disinterest in the Palestinian issue and Israel maintains its impressive economic growth. There may be some future moment when the demographic/political/military/strategic situation reverses and the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships come to view the relationship between Israel and the PA as such a drag on their national well-being that they would be better off negotiating a new one. But that does not describe the current moment and while the local situation can change suddenly and rapidly, such a change may be a long time coming.

Meanwhile, therefore, relations between Israelis and Palestinians will be governed by agreements already signed, institutions already built up (separately and together), and the actual record of cooperation, coordination, and conflict they have experienced. What the two sides have today is not peace but it is also

not war or even low-level conflict; Israeli-Palestinian relations today are in fact similar to the unhappy but grudgingly tolerable relations that characterize ties among many states in the Middle East.

So: Should America still pursue Middle East peace? The answer is a qualified yes.

There is no doubt that resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has less strategic urgency today than it once had. (Whether it was ever as urgent as some pundits claimed is debatable but beside the present point.) Few would argue that the absence of a new Israeli-Palestinian agreement is a *casus belli* for any Arab state or an opportunity for some external great power to expand its influence into the Levant. If catastrophe strikes and the two sides slide into an *intifada*-level paroxysm of violence, the regional implications are likely to be even more limited today than they were during the second Palestinian uprising. It is true that the Islamic Republic of Iran opposes any Muslim reconciliation with Israel, but confounding Tehran on this issue is not in and of itself a strong enough reason to invest considerable effort on peacemaking.

But the answer is still “yes”: The peace process advances U.S. interests and those of its regional allies. America and these countries—Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and moderate Arab states in the Gulf and North Africa—are all status quo powers; they share a common view of the peace process as a tool in the broader effort to promote stability. They all see benefit in an active, U.S.-led diplomacy to resolve a lingering, emotive regional dispute. Without such diplomacy, there would be a vacuum that more radical, anti-status quo forces would happily fill. To be sure, the peace process is not the sole or even most important arrow in our collective quiver and its pursuit must be viewed in the context of broader objectives (alliance cohesion, counter-proliferation, counter-terrorism, energy security, and so forth) but nonetheless it remains smart policy.

Moreover, Arab states lobby for American engagement in peacemaking for one of the same reasons Nixon and Kissinger originally conceived of the peace process: It gives Arab capitals a political excuse for maintaining strategic relations with the great power ally of their putative Zionist adversary. Even if the urgency of success has receded over the years, the perception of effort remains important. While this especially applies to Jordan, with its large and restive Palestinian population, it remains relevant to varying degrees in all Arab states aligned with America.

For Israel, even more is at stake in having Washington actively and constructively engaged in peacemaking. When America works closely with Israel on peace, it underscores the strength of the U.S.-Israel partnership, a

critical element of Israel's strategic deterrent. It may sound like kabuki theater, but Israel usually wants Washington to play peacemaker even when Israel itself is not ready to make major decisions that would increase the likelihood of diplomatic success. That's because America's engagement in the peace process has other, derivative benefits for Israel: It can forestall negative actions by various Palestinian elements; it can shore up Israel's relations with peace partners Jordan and Egypt; it can provide a diplomatic umbrella for quiet cooperation between Israel and other Arab and Muslim states; and it can even deliver political benefits to the sitting Israeli government, which usually likes to be seen working with Washington on the peace process even if it isn't willing to deliver key concessions, and indeed sometimes likes to be seen standing up to American pressure to deliver those concessions. The political complexion of the Israeli government is irrelevant; Left or Right, Likud or Labor, they all want Washington as a partner in the pursuit of peace, though they may differ on the content of both the partnership and the peace.

Ultimately, therefore, America should remain engaged in the peace process as part of a broader regional strategy to promote stability and because that engagement is itself important to America's regional allies. If a vacuum of peacemaking persists, negative actors could fill the gap and disbelief about even the potential for progress could take hold, both of which could contribute to instability and become significant obstacles to peacemaking when circumstances for a breakthrough eventually ripen. If the harvest phase of the peace process is yet ahead, the gardening phase is a necessary precursor to getting there.

The qualification to this concerns what America is willing to invest to achieve a peace breakthrough, especially in terms of presidential capital. If a new Israeli-Palestinian agreement has less strategic value than previous Arab-Israel agreements, American leaders should be willing to expend less to achieve it. Given how little time Barack Obama and Donald Trump and their secretaries of state have spent on this issue, that already seems the case. (In terms of the past decade, the outlier is John Kerry, whose tenure was characterized by his dogged pursuit of breakthroughs on Israeli-Palestinian peace and the Iran nuclear negotiations; on only one of these did he have the full support of the President and that, in part, explains the results.) Without a profound change in the regional status quo, it is difficult to see a rationale for another Bill Clinton- or John Kerry-like push for an Israeli-Palestinian breakthrough.

So, what is to be done? There is no shortage of suggestions for dramatic measures that would shake up Israeli-Palestinian relations. One proposed by

advocates on the political fringes who reject the idea of a further partition of historic Palestine is euphemistically known as the “one-state solution.” Variations of this idea are supported by Israeli maximalists who want to extend full Israeli sovereignty over the entirety of the West Bank and by Palestinian maximalists who want Israeli citizenship, rather than a separate, independent state, with the goal of eventually voting the Jewish state out of existence. The one-state solution, so-called, is therefore not a solution at all because it precludes any outlet for the national aspirations of one of the parties. It is instead a recipe for perpetual conflict, a diplomatic cul-de-sac that no American President should ever entertain, let alone embrace.

A less extreme but still radical suggestion is to increase the negative incentives for peacemaking. That can be done by making the alternatives to the current situation more appealing by denying one or both of the parties the benefits of the status quo. The Trump Administration currently appears to be pursuing one variety of this approach by tightening the economic belt on the Palestinian Authority through the cumulative impact of the imposition of the Taylor Force Act, the cut in funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, and the decrease in U.S. development support to projects in the West Bank. Israeli leftists and even some Palestinian leaders advocate a different variation of this approach to target what they believe is the source of Israeli satisfaction with the status quo: the entire Palestinian Authority. Collapsing the PA would, in theory, make Israel more willing to consider compromises to the Palestinians by making the Israeli military and security services bear the entire burden of West Bank security, and the Israeli taxpayer bear the costs for basic services for the Palestinians.

There is certainly a role in diplomacy for disincentives, and there is a time and place for them in the peace process, too. The U.S. government has no interest in reinforcing a negative status quo and thereby inadvertently helping leaders avoid difficult choices. Appropriately employed, disincentives can change a calculus for the better. The George W. Bush Administration, for example, made a signal contribution to peacemaking in June 2002 when it conditioned U.S. support for Palestinian statehood on the development of democratic institutions and the election of new leaders, an emphasis that regrettably dissipated within U.S. policy over time. What made that disincentive a practical contribution to peacemaking—hastening the transfer to a post-Arafat leadership—was that it was matched with a positive incentive, America’s backing for Palestinian statehood.

(Unlike the Palestinians, with whom the United States has a narrower set of interests and does not have a strategic relationship, the issue with Israel is more

complicated. The United States always needs to keep the peace process—and, specifically, the question of disincentives—within the larger context of the U.S.-Israel strategic relationship. In the past, some Administrations have erred in prioritizing the peace process “trees” over the strategic “forest,” the result of which is usually negative for both.)

A strategy based solely or overwhelmingly on disincentives, however, is much less likely to succeed than a policy that intelligently mixes carrots and sticks, with more of the former than the latter. If an aggrieved party fighting for what it believes is its national existence sees nothing but punitive action from the alleged “honest broker,” chances are it will either fight back or try to outlast the “broker”; after all, for the aggrieved party these issues are existential, while for the faraway “broker” they are not. Indeed, there is no historical precedent for solely “hardball diplomacy” making local parties more amenable to the give-and-take necessary for Middle East peacemaking. Such steps may produce a certain psychological satisfaction and some may be justified on the merits. However, there is little reason to think such ideas will turn one side or the other into a more conciliatory partner for peace, for even if pressure can strong-arm a party into an agreement, it is not a sound foundation for solid, long-term neighborly relations.

Whatever virtues such proposals possess for other reasons, the disincentive approach is not a wise or effective strategy for peace. The Trump Administration risks going down this route in its current approach toward the Palestinians. While there is a certain logic to each measure it has recently taken, the cumulative effect cannot but be viewed as punitive, without a compensating set of incentives that Palestinians can reasonably expect to see on the horizon. And even as a punitive strategy, it is difficult to discern who is being punished—Palestinian political leaders or ordinary Palestinians. This approach undervalues the “glass-is-more-than-half-full” assessment of the PA outlined above, especially the PA’s vital contribution on security, and it does not appear to recognize the political oxygen needed to ensure an environment conducive for security cooperation and other critical PA functions. It is easy to misinterpret the absence of vocal expressions of concern from Israel and Arab states as support for this approach, but that would be a mistake given that they have other reasons to mute their reactions.

That leaves two, broad options. Both come under the heading of traditional incentive-focused diplomacy, in which a key aspect of the U.S. role is to provide protection and inducements to leaders willing to take “risks for peace,” while at the same time denying leaders easy “exit ramps” to avoid difficult

decisions. These are the options that have divided American presidents and their diplomats since the founding of the modern peace process 45 years ago: the *comprehensive* approach, which seeks early agreement on the overall parameters of the final settlement, leaving implementation to stages; and the *incremental* approach, which envisions step-by-step progress on discrete issues, with each mini-agreement building a foundation for the next mini-agreement. Nixon (and Gerald Ford) and Kissinger patented the incremental approach through the latter's shuttle diplomacy; Jimmy Carter then came to office attracted by the appeal of a comprehensive solution, in partnership with the Soviet Union. This so spooked Egypt's and Israel's leaders that they took the dramatic step of reaching out to each other to circumvent Carter's plan. While Carter eventually played an essential role in achieving the historic success at Camp David and the bilateral peace treaty six months later, this difference in approach—comprehensive versus incremental—has repeatedly reemerged in various forms ever since.

Reading the tea leaves of statements by President Trump and his chief aides responsible for the Middle East peace process, the current Administration appears inclined to the comprehensive approach. This is certainly the implication of Trump's "deal of the century" rhetoric, as well as the widely accepted meaning of comments made on core issues like borders, refugees, and the status of Jerusalem.

If accurate, Trump's would be the second full-scale presidential plan for the resolution of this conflict, following on the "parameters" formally proposed by Bill Clinton in his final days in office. In the current environment, there is little reason to think a Trump peace plan would enjoy any greater success than Clinton's. Not only have both parties publicly embraced highly adversarial negotiating positions—with the Palestinians adopting a diplomatic strategy that avoids direct negotiations and instead seeks redress against Israel before multilateral fora, perhaps including the International Criminal Court, and the Israelis saying a peace agreement can be reached without a single Israeli being displaced from even the most remote corner of the West Bank—but they have also suspended much of their quiet coordination and cooperation, save for security ties.

While leadership remains the *sine qua non* criterion of peace process success, even the strongest leaders—statesmen like Sadat, Begin, Hussein, and Rabin—could not operate in a wholly inhospitable political environment, and in any case, one is hard-pressed to identify leaders of that stature on today's regional stage. At a time when civil society contact between Israelis and Palestinians hovers near zero and when key political leaders and mainstream media on each

side constantly question the legitimacy of the other as peace partner, it is difficult to imagine that majorities would be willing even to entertain creative ideas on peace and reconciliation, assuming that is what the Trump plan has to offer. There may come a moment when it is appropriate for a President to lay a set of bridging proposals on the table, but Israelis and Palestinians are now far from that moment. The President's proposal, therefore, is likely to attract some polite but non-committal praise and perhaps even a willingness to explore certain aspects further; but if it contains a detailed outline of the endgame for this conflict it will likely be "dead on arrival."

That brings us back to where we started, which is precisely where Nixon and Kissinger started a generation ago: incrementalism. In the current environment, this extends to what are colloquially called "bottom-up" as well as "top-down" initiatives. The former include a broad range of often technical but potentially high-impact ideas that are essential to reinvigorating the institutions of peace and the prospect for future progress: Rebuilding cooperative relations between Palestinian and Israeli governments, bureaucracies, businesses, and civil society; improving Palestinian governance capacity and service delivery; and expanding opportunities for Palestinian economic development, including commercial enterprises within Palestinian territories and enhanced access for labor and goods to the Israeli market. The latter includes more high-level engagement such as personal meetings and summitry; diplomatic initiatives to identify areas of agreement or near-agreement, determine the most effective formats and venues to address disagreements, and offer creative negotiating ideas; launching semi-official "track II" diplomacy among trusted lieutenants; persistent efforts to bolster existing peace relationships with Egypt and Jordan; and the orchestration of supportive regional actors who can create an encouraging and receptive environment for peacemaking.

(Note that the peace process is not sealed off from broader regional strategy; how Washington comports itself regarding the expansion of Iranian influence into the Levant, for example, has a profound impact on the confidence of local parties to work with each other under the American strategic umbrella. Indeed, effectively countering Iran in the Levant will, as much as any other initiative, increase the prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace.)

In each of the Obama and George W. Bush Administrations, presidents and secretaries of state were presented at critical moments with both top-down and bottom-up options and chose the former: hence, the Annapolis process in 2007 and the Kerry peace initiative in 2014. Both failed, and failure is not harmless, for American diplomatic capital is finite and burst expectations can exact psychological costs, shifting the terms of political competition within both

Israeli and Palestinian contexts in ways that are often unpredictable and generally unhelpful. The appeal of top-down is that it is commonly viewed as the sexy short-cut to success; bottom-up is consistently seen as too hard, too gritty, too low-profile, not worthy of the time, effort, and supervision of grand statesmen and political leaders. While there are moments when administrations wade into the bottom-up muck, such as the Bush Administration's important decision to stand-up the mission of an under-the-radar U.S. security coordinator in the West Bank, they are regrettably few and fleeting.

The record suggests both are necessary prerequisites for diplomatic breakthrough; neither is, on its own, likely to be sufficient. Without tangible movement on the ground that improves the lives of ordinary people, political movement at the leadership level will not be credible; similarly, without an overarching political process that projects hope and possibility, the hard work of building bottom-up progress will be difficult to sustain.

What, then, to do? The U.S. government should channel its inner Nixon and Kissinger, return to first principles, and develop a peace process the way it was meant to be. That begins with identifying regional strategic objectives, factors in the interests of current and potential allies in the region and beyond, and considers how the effort to resolve the local conflict between Israelis and Palestinians can help the U.S. government achieves those objectives. If we are wise, prudent, and persistent, we will devise a process that advances U.S. interests, and we may even help Israelis and Palestinians make peace.

¹¹ For an American critique, see [Michael Mandelbaum](#); for an Israeli critique, see [Efraim Karsh](#); and for a Palestinian critique, see [Husam Zomlot](#). For a classic comedy routine on the Middle East peace process, see [Jon Stewart](#).

¹² The brilliance of this approach was cogently explained by Harvey Sicherman in *Broker or Advocate?: The U.S. Role in the Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1973-1978* (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 1978).

¹³ Only faraway Iran tried to intervene in the *intifada*, through its attempt to ship weapons to the Palestinians via the *Karine A*. See, for example, my article on the incident, [The Strategic Implications of Iran-Palestinian Collusion](#)

¹⁴ For a comprehensive, dispassionate look at Israeli settlements in the West Bank and their potential impact on peacemaking, see the [online tool](#) developed by David Makovsky.