



Imposing Peace: Trump and the Palestinians

By: Osamah Khalil · December, 2017

President Donald Trump's announcement recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel is the culmination of US foreign policy over seven decades in which the goal of the peace process has been to impose a solution on the Palestinians. Yet for nearly thirty years, the Palestinian leadership's strategy has been to emphasize the primacy of negotiations and elite-driven politics. They have focused on ensuring the loyalty of Palestinians for their political program through patronage and repression. The leadership has eschewed, if not actively undermined, grassroots organizing and enervated Palestinian institutions in the vain and increasingly desperate hope that their efforts would be rewarded by the United States and Israel. Meanwhile, their policies ensured that the narrow clique that benefits from the peace process and Israel's occupation endures. The results of this failed strategy were on full display with Trump's announcement but they have also been apparent for quite some time.

The Palestinian Authority is dependent on financial support, especially from the United States. Therefore, it is unlikely to rely on more than rhetoric, symbolic actions, and empty threats in the short term. It will continue to focus on international elites, and may attempt to find a new intermediary for negotiations with Israel. However, there is no reason for Israel to resume negotiations at this time or allow a new mediator to emerge. If the Palestinian leadership is serious about a shift away from the two-state solution, as one of its [representatives](#)



recently claimed, then the one significant action it could take is to dissolve the Palestinian Authority. Though such a dramatic action would force a response by Israel, the United States, the Arab states, and the broader international community, it would require that the leadership abandon their positions and privileges. That is even more unlikely than the emergence of a new broker for peace negotiations to challenge the United States.

Trump's Declaration: Seven Decades in the Making

The peace process can effectively be divided into two periods. In the first, from the end of the 1948 Palestine War and the Nakba to the mid-1970s, the United States sought to ignore the Palestinian question by focusing on the Arab states. The Palestinians were treated as a humanitarian problem to be resolved without their input, rather than a political issue that would include them as a party to the negotiations.

Although the Arab states were generally amenable to a peace agreement with Israel as long as the Palestinian refugee problem could be solved, Israel remained the major impediment. Israel's intransigence only grew after the June 1967 War and the occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza Strip, Sinai Peninsula, and Golan Heights. In the immediate aftermath of the June 1967 War, the United States emphasized "land for peace" negotiations, especially with Egypt and Jordan. It continued to ignore the emerging Palestinian political organizations, including Fatah, which would eventually dominate the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

Following the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War, Washington appeared more willing to address Palestinian grievances. Yet in the second period of the peace process, Washington sought to limit or undermine the participation of Palestinians in negotiations. Publicly, this was achieved by imposing requirements on the PLO to demonstrate its suitability as a negotiating partner. Washington insisted that the



organization accept UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 and recognize Israel. Privately, [the United States and Israel coordinated on negotiations](#) and Washington agreed to support, if not defer to, Israel's stance on the key issues. Thus, Washington required the PLO to make major concessions merely to participate in negotiations, without any guarantees that they would be successful. The secret agreements and coordination between the United States and Israel served to ensure that any agreement [would be at the expense of the Palestinians](#).

The Myth of the Honest Broker

The notion that the United States is an "honest broker" has been perpetuated by self-serving American diplomats, policymakers, and the press. It has no basis in the historical reality of the Arab-Israeli conflict and peace process. Washington's outsized role is in part a reflection of its status as the sole superpower that shaped the post-World War II international order and institutions. There is often a fundamental misunderstanding of the Cold War era and the influence of the United States and the Soviet Union on the world stage. Although they were competitors, Washington was and remains far more powerful and influential politically, economically, and militarily than Moscow.

Although America's international position was diminished in the early 1970s due to the Vietnam War, the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War provided Washington with an opportunity to reassert its influence in the Middle East through the peace process. The Arab states and the Palestinians did not view the United States as an honest broker. Rather, it was the only power that was seen as capable of inducing concessions by Israel. The notion that the US could help deliver peace with Israel was promoted by President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger as they sought to contain the influence of the Soviet Union in the region and internationally. It was demonstrated in Kissinger's deliberate policies toward the peace process, which aimed to exclude Moscow



from negotiations and break the unified Arab negotiating position.

The 1978 Camp David Accords and eventual peace treaty between Egypt and Israel affirmed Kissinger's strategy, which was adopted by and influenced subsequent American administrations. Although Washington could and did help deliver peace between Egypt and Israel, what is often overlooked is that Israel's concessions came at the expense of Palestinians living under occupation. Nor did the Camp David agreement result in subsequent peace talks, as President Jimmy Carter hoped, or further territorial concessions by Israel.

The Oslo Accords further entrenched these policies. Washington was not involved in the original negotiations or the 1993 Declaration of Principles. Indeed, once the process was monopolized by President Bill Clinton, the final status negotiations were delayed and eventually collapsed. As with prior American administrations, Clinton publicly and privately coordinated with Israel. The Clinton administration secretly agreed with the then and current Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, to discuss any American proposals with Israel before presenting them to the Palestinian negotiating team.

Although the Palestinians finally had a seat at the negotiating table as near equals with the Israelis, and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat was awarded repeat visits to the Clinton White House, Washington's role was again to impose a peace agreement. Arafat and the newly created Palestinian Authority were expected to implement an unpalatable peace and continued occupation in return for the trappings of statehood but no real sovereignty. In spite of all the hyperbole of a "generous offer" at Camp David in 2000, Israel and then Prime Minister Ehud Barak were unwilling to accede to even the appearance of a Palestinian state and a divided Jerusalem. The failure of the final status negotiations was conveniently blamed on the Palestinians and Arafat, but its roots date to Washington's consistent approach to the peace process from its inception.



The Role of US Politics

Although the United States holds the paramount position on the world stage, its domestic politics are parochial and driven by the two- and four-year election cycles. The necessities of fundraising for Congressional and presidential political campaigns translates into the outsized influence of prominent donors on policy issues, including foreign relations. This was demonstrated in the willingness of presidential candidates, including Barack Obama in 2008, to publicly declare that Jerusalem should [“remain the capital of Israel, and it must remain undivided”](#) during the elections but defer action until a final agreement was achieved.

Trump’s dismal approval ratings and slim achievements after nearly a year in office contributed to the decision on Jerusalem. In particular, it may help the Republican party’s chances to maintain its majority in the 2018 midterm elections and Trump’s hopes for reelection in 2020. The announcement is likely to improve Trump’s standing among the Republican party’s evangelical Christian base, and some prominent figures [quickly hailed the announcement](#). It will also please [major donors](#) like [Sheldon Adelson](#), a leading [supporter of Israeli settlements](#). As the decision had bi-partisan support, including from [leading Democrats](#), it may also make Trump and the Republican party more appealing to pro-Israel voters in key states where elections are increasingly competitive due to changing demographics.

Regional Maneuverings

As a weak non-state actor, the Palestinians have been susceptible to regional dynamics and great power politics. This included regimes that were hostile to Palestinian nationalism, as in Jordan, or those that sought to manipulate competing Palestinian political parties for their own regional aspirations and agendas, like Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. Washington has often sought to pressure the



Palestinian leadership through the Arab states with mixed results.

In their attempts to strengthen a coalition against Iran that includes Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates may attempt to force Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian leadership to accept a peace deal. However, they will find that the impediment is not in Ramallah. Rather, as other Arab leaders belatedly learned, Israel will pocket any concessions while making new demands and scuttle negotiations that would result in a Palestinian state. Trump's announcement on Jerusalem, presumably with the tacit acceptance of Riyadh and other Arab capitals, only rewards Israel's intransigence at the expense of Palestinians living under occupation and in the diaspora.

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