

The Failure of the US as “Third-party Mediator” in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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*The article below By **Jezile Torcula** was written in 2021. It focusses on the role of the US as a third-party mediator, beginning in 1993, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Two years hence, all hell broke loose in Gaza amid Israel’s “Operation Swords of Iron,” in retaliation to Hamas’ October 7, 2023 “Operation Al-Aqsa Flood.”*

The latest rounds of negotiations between Hamas and Israel — mediated by the US, Egypt and Qatar — resulted in a three-phased ceasefire.

Phase One will commence on Sunday, January 19, 2025, and will last for six weeks.

Clear negotiations for the succeeding two phases will take place following the success of the first phase. Interestingly, this roadmap was proposed by the administration of outgoing US President Joe Biden in May 2024 and only in the past few days did Israel and Hamas reach an agreement. Why now?

Moreover, incoming US President Donald Trump, who is a staunch supporter of Israel, is hardly an honest broker in the mediation process. Remember his 2020 “[Deal of the Century](#)”?

Regardless of who sits as president, the US will never be a successful mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Why? Because of its imperial agenda in the Middle East, where Israel serves as its biggest ally.

The Failure of the US as Third-party Mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

By Jezile Torculas, May 12, 2021

Introduction

For several decades, the Middle East has become a hotspot for war operations. A well-known regional turmoil is the Arab-Israeli conflict which erupted in 1948 and has not been fully resolved until today. It takes its deeper roots from the support of some members of the Arab League (Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon) for the Palestinians in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that resulted from the birth of the state of Israel in the same year.

The protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a result of the so-called Zionist movement that holds the belief that the Jews, based on moral and political right, deserve a homeland and that “no other people’s claim to this land is equivalent to the Jewish claim” (Cook, 2008). This argument is a modern reinvention of the biblical belief that the “Jews are a chosen people”. The original goal of the Zionist movement was the creation of a sanctuary for the much-persecuted Jewish people in Europe during the Second World War, especially after the Holocaust; they identified the Holy Land (the region that stretches from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea; traditionally the land of Israel and some parts of Palestine) to be their homeland (Cook, 2008). Subsequently, Jewish people have been occupying vast swaths of Palestinian lands in the Gaza Strip (commonly known as Gaza) and the West Bank. Further, Israel’s victory in the 1967 Six-Day War against Egypt, Jordan and Syria increased the vigor of the Israelis and reinvented Zionism to accommodate the colonial expansion of Gaza and the West Bank — their so-called biblical birthright.

The Jewish settlements and occupation in Palestine occupied territories have been widely criticized by the international community, human rights organizations and the United Nations to be egregious violations of the international law based on the a) Geneva Convention relative to the protection of civilian persons in time of war, and b) the Hague Convention IV of 1907. However, the UN is ostensibly a toothless organization that operates under the auspices of its biggest funders. Hence, despite the global condemnation, Israel continued with its illegal activities in Palestine.

According to Rashid Khalidi (2013), a professor of Arab Studies at Columbia University,

“The conflict is a highly asymmetrical colonial struggle between, on the one hand, a militarily dominant and economically powerful Israeli state acting with the full support of the greatest power in world history, and, on the other, a divided, dispersed, and oppressed Palestinian people living either under occupation or in exile, and enjoying very limited external support.”

It is worth noting that Israel is the largest cumulative recipient of US foreign assistance since the Second World War (Cavari in Freedman, 2012; p. 100).

Four decades through the conflict, the United States offered to bring both parties (Israel and Palestine) to the negotiating table to begin with the peace process and put an end to extreme violence, terrorism and displacement resulting from the settlements and occupation. According to Pruitt and Kim, “the goal of mediation is to reach a voluntary agreement.” However, it has already been three decades of futile attempt by the US to bring peace in Israel and Palestine.

Against this backdrop, this essay aims to examine the failure of the US as a third-party mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Being a superpower, the US has the best leverage to establish lasting peace in the region but present-day Palestine is still characterized by relentless violence and oppression, dismal poverty and unemployment. To this effect, this essay argues that the failure of US third-party mediation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not solely predicated on its status as a global superpower but rather on other various factors such as Israel and Palestine’s commitment to the peace process and their resolve to end the near-century hostility, and US’ bilateral relations with both parties. Specifically, this essay aims to answer the following questions:

a) How does the role of the US as a superpower influence the peace settlement?

b) what are the dynamics of US-Israel relations and US-Palestine relations? and

c) what is the impact of these bilateral relations on the mediation process?

Brief History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

It is impossible to divorce the wider Arab-Israeli conflict from the much-concentrated Israeli-Palestinian conflict because to some extent, one resulted from the other. Although this essay touches on some details of the Arab-Israeli conflict, its focus remains centripetal to the protracted struggle of the Palestinians against the Israelis.

Historically, Palestine was a territory of Ottoman Syria. It was only conquered by Britain in 1917 after its victory over the Ottoman empire in the First World War. In the succeeding year, the League of Nations approved the British mandate of Palestine which resulted in Britain's establishment of a civil administration. The mandate realized the thrust of the 1917 Balfour Declaration which underlined a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Mass immigration of Jews who feared the Holocaust amid the Second World War ensued from the said declaration. Essentially, this move was bound to have destructive ramifications. Palestinian Arabs responded with resistance, called a halt to settlements and demanded their own independence. Years of British mandate were characterized by terrorism, violence and rebellion. In its failed attempts to bring independence to ravaged Palestine, Britain eventually turned over the Palestine issue, or "Palestine question" as it is otherwise known, to the United Nations thereby putting an end to its 3-decade mandate of the territory.

The 1947 UN turnover was an unprecedented blow to the Palestinian statehood. The UN General Assembly (UNGA) voted on the partition of Palestine; they passed UN Resolution 181, allocating 56 percent of Palestine to the Jews which comprised only 30 percent of the entire population of the territory (Harms & Ferry, 2008; p. 113). Consequently, a series of wars broke out between Israel and Palestine, inducing spillovers in the neighboring Arab nations of Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon. Particularly, the year 1948 was marked with heavy bombardments in the region. What started as a civil war between the Jews and Palestinian Arabs in Palestine in 1947-48 erupted into a major Arab-Israeli war in the earlier period of 1948 where Israel ended victorious. In the same year, the infamous Deir Yassin massacre took place that led to Palestinian exodus to other parts of the territory and to the neighboring Arab nations. This gave rise to a key Palestinian issue: the Palestinian refugee problem.

Amid the ongoing domestic violence and terrorism in the occupied territories of Palestine, a second Arab-Israeli war broke out in 1967, known as the Six-Day War, that altogether boosted the morale of Israel for yet another military achievement. Elated by their victory, brazen officials of the Israeli government were prompted to double the settlements in Gaza and the West Bank. Alongside the soaring number of occupations under the administration of Prime Minister Menachem Begin, the Palestinian Arabs were stuck in political isolation with little to no aid coming from the Arab world, leaving them feeling abandoned and forgotten. For all these reasons coupled with their demand for statehood that apparently fell on deaf ears, the Arab Palestinians ignited a mass uprising aimed against the Israeli occupations. This event, called the first intifada, lasted from 1987-93.



Palestinian protestors confront Israeli troops in Gaza City, 1987 (Licensed under CC BY 4.0)

Seven years after, the occurrence of a second intifada, also called as Al-Aqsa Intifada, was triggered by the bold visit to Jerusalem (whose ownership is another key Palestinian issue) of then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon who was accompanied by thousands of Israeli police officers and soldiers. Shortly after, he announced the construction of a separation wall/security fence from the northern end of the West Bank down to the south, deeply encroaching on the Palestinian boundary, therefore claiming large portions of Palestinian land. This decision was ruled illegal by the International Court of Justice (Harms & Ferry, 2008). Fanning the flame of the intifada was Sharon's 2004 Disengagement Plan in Gaza. This meant for Israel to evacuate the occupied territory including their settlements; but that they will redeploy outside the Gaza Strip, remain in control of Gaza air space and sea space — virtually still in control of Gaza, regardless if inside or outside the territory. The second intifada lasted for five years.



Early Israeli construction of West Bank barrier, 2003 (Licensed under CC BY 2.0)

For the Arab Palestinians, life under Jewish occupation and settlements was nothing short of brutish and oppressive. Older generations of Palestinians in the occupied territories approached this hardship with steadfastness, which they referred to as “sumud”; their passive resistance allowed them to remain on their land, refusing to budge and alternatively creating their own organizations and services to make their lives easier. However, a “new sumud” emerged from the younger generations who resisted more actively. Israeli checkpoints, searches, curfews and school closures were met with strikes, demonstrations, boycotts and clashes. As a result, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) who manned the border controls were faced with mounting pressure. Iron fist — an Israeli policy of “might, power and beating” — was used to quell the rebellion. This immediately earned condemnation from the UN which drafted Resolution 43/21, “criticizing Israel’s gross violations of international law against the defenseless Palestinian civilians” to which the US and Israel voted against (Harms & Ferry, 2008). Despite international consensus, the IDF remained aggressive.

To address the dire economic situation, isolation, population immobility, unemployment and heavy reliance on international aid following the withdrawal of Israel in Gaza in 2005, the Palestinians held parliamentary elections that installed Hamas into the Palestinian Authority (PA, the government of Palestine). The leadership was short-lived, being viewed by the US and Israel as a terrorist entity, prompting the latter to refuse to enter into bilateral negotiations unless replaced with a Fatah (a Palestinian nationalist social democratic political party) representative. Adding insult to injury, a group of Palestinians in Gaza captured an Israeli soldier in 2006 which only exacerbated the Israeli siege in the territory.

Israeli aggression is manifold and becomes more manifest as time progresses. Forced evictions and house demolitions have been rampant up to this day, leaving thousands of Arab Palestinians homeless, devastated and impoverished. This act of collective punishment is illegal in view of the principles of international law (Halper, 2008; p. 43). Israel's grip on the concepts of Zionism, Jewish exclusivity, maximalism and ethnocracy opens up a one-way road to apartheid where ethnic cleansing is used as a tool to further their interests and security needs.

Bilateral Relations of the US with Israel and Palestine

According to Eriksson (2019), "a mediator with strong links to either party can jeopardize their suitability by appearing biased" but at the same time can be useful if it can persuade such party into making concessions during the negotiations. To assess the efficacy of the United States as a third-party mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, it is both important and particularly necessary to trace its bilateral relations with both parties. While neutrality is mediation's main attribute, having a superpower as a mediator entails to some extent the furtherance of self-interested goals at the expense of one side (Bercovitch & Rubin, 1992).

US-Israel Relations

US relations with Israel demonstrate the importance of ideology in geopolitics. Both states adhere to the concepts of democracy and anti-terrorism, fighting a common enemy of special variations, i.e. Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Hamas, and Hezbollah. The US is the purveyor of democracy and Israel happens to be the only full-fledged democratic state in the entire Middle Eastern region. Apart from ideology, US-Israel relations are founded on security, political and military aspects.

Particularly at the outset of the John F. Kennedy administration (1961-63), strong relations between the two states have sprouted. The CIA (US) and Mossad (Israel) entered into intelligence cooperation. Moreover, Israel's victories in the two Arab-Israeli wars (1948 and 1967) sealed its military superiority in the Middle East which unequivocally gained the attention and support of the US amid the cold war. The bilateral support of the superpower was also in relation to its agenda to block Russian influence in the region. A striking example of warm relations between the two states occurred during the Lyndon B. Johnson presidency (1963-69) — that is, the deliberate Israeli attack of the USS Liberty at the height of the Six-Day War in 1967. Thirty-four crew members died and hundreds were wounded. Instead of retaliation, the US accepted Israel's apology and was mum on the incident. On top of that, Johnson supplied Israel with fighter-bombers, an addition to its arsenal.

Security cooperation between the two states reached a new high under Richard M. Nixon (1969-74). In the course of the 1973 Yom Kippur war, the US conducted airlifts of military equipment and armaments to Israel amounting to \$2.2 billion in response to the Soviet rearmament of Egypt (Cook, 2008). US aid to Israel continued in the succeeding administrations. George W. Bush (2001-09), albeit detached from the peace process, voiced support for Israeli PM Ariel Sharon's fight against terrorism, invited the PM a couple of times to the White House but not the Palestinian Authority representative Yasser Arafat. Both Bush and Sharon blamed Arafat for the intifada.

Barack H. Obama (2009-17) turned the tide of events. He exhibited cold relations with Israel in his attempt to portray the US as even-handed in the conflict settlement and as a friend,

not an enemy, of the Muslim world. He embarked on frequent trips to the Arab nations but never in Israel.

In the early phase of his term, Obama met with Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu in the White House and the tension between both leaders was very visible. Despite all the efforts of the Obama administration in maintaining neutrality in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a formidable lobby group prodded the president to revert his policy. Pro-Israel Lobby is a “group of American Jews and evangelical Christian Zionists that seek to influence US foreign policy toward Israel in the direction they believe is in Israel’s interests” (Cook, 2008). The American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) is a dominant organization within the lobby. This very same organization is a key player in the incumbent administration of Donald J. Trump (2017-). To fill his naivete in foreign relations, Trump turned to his son-in-law Jared Kushner, who maintains a close link with Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu, for his pro-Israel stance. He further reassured Israel at the beginning of his presidency that it “has always been and remains [our] most important ally in the region” (Jewish Virtual Library).

For the purpose of this essay, it is important to reiterate that Israel is the largest cumulative recipient of US foreign assistance since the Second World War (Cavari in Freedman, 2012; p. 100).

US-Palestine Relations

Unlike the all-encompassing bilateral relations between the US and Israel, the interaction between the US and Palestine has been merely in the form of aid and funding.



The US has consistently offered bilateral economic assistance to Palestine since 1994 until 2018, totaling to more than \$5 billion. Likewise, Palestinian refugees have been receiving international aid through the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) of which the US was the biggest funder/contributor for almost a decade (2010-2018). In 2018, the Trump administration cut off its funding on the said agency due to alleged inflation of refugee numbers. What remains of the US-Palestine relations today is the non-lethal security assistance from the US Bureau of International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) account which “helps train and equip PA security forces and officials from the PA’s justice sector” (Zanotti, 2018).

The future of US funding for the PA and the Palestinians in general is obscure especially now that the animosity between both states continues unabated, triggered by PA President Mahmoud Abbas’s cutting off of diplomatic ties with the Trump administration after the latter pursued its destructive Jerusalem policy in early 2018.

The Mediation Process

According to Bercovitch and Rubin (1992), in the event of a superpower mediation in a

bilateral conflict, the negotiation may and is highly likely to serve as a foreign policy instrument of the superpower in a direction favorable to their agenda. The US has long signified interest to hegemonize the Middle East; and with Israel's consistent victory over the two Arab-Israeli wars, it has been considered as a strategic asset of the superpower. While the US did not use direct force in the course of the peace process, it has been implicitly supporting the policies of Israel to the detriment of Palestine. Neutrality is the sine qua non and an absolute ethic of mediation in which the US has failed to demonstrate over time.

It was during the presidency of George H. W. Bush (1989-93) when the US saw an opportunity to voluntarily bring Israel and the concerned Arab nations into the negotiating table to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict and establish a stable US control in the Middle East. But the US mediation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict officially began in 1993 under the administration of Bill Clinton (1993-2001).

Eriksson (2019) laid out three main strategies of mediator behavior in conflict resolution: communication-facilitation, formulation and manipulation. As a superpower mediator, the US employed a combination of these strategies in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Clinton only served as a communicator-facilitator during the Oslo Accord in 1993, Taba Accord in 1995, and Hebron Agreement in 1997. As such, his administration primarily hosted the two states for communication without implicating any substantive contribution to the negotiations. He invited Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PA representative Yasser Arafat to the White House for a signing ceremony, making the accords official. Amidst the partial display of neutrality, Clinton's support for Israeli policies was manifested in his veto of a UN resolution highlighting the illegality of Jewish settlement construction in East Jerusalem. In the later part of his term, he started to exercise a greater degree of control in terms of frequency, pace, protocol and procedure of the meetings as in the cases of the 1998 Wye River Accord and 2000 Camp David II. Arafat and PM Benjamin Netanyahu sat together for another set of negotiations before US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and CIA Director George Tenet in 1998 at the Wye River Plantation in Maryland. The US representatives outlined specific Palestinian tasks concerning terrorism and security and Israeli redeployments in the West Bank. However, the Wye River Accord was immediately suspended by Netanyahu amid strong Israeli backlash against his administration. In 2000, Clinton invited Arafat and PM Ehud Barak at the presidential retreat in Maryland's Camp David where Israeli proposals were channeled through the US, orally, without any written records. The summit resulted in utter failure which was blamed by both Clinton and Barak on Arafat due to his inability to produce counterproposals. Barak presented impossible policies regarding the allocation of the West Bank, ownership of Jerusalem and the right of return of Palestinian refugees to Israel. Arafat's refusal to meet Barak's terms was translated into PA's lack of commitment to peace and compromise. In his attempt to address the unrelenting disagreements between both parties, Clinton formulated his own set of parameters which was unquestionably accepted by both sides.

The succeeding administration of George W. Bush (2001-09) was somehow detached from the peace process but nonetheless poured strong support towards Israel. In a few instances of mediation, Bush was a key formulator compared to Clinton's facilitation. Amidst the second intifada, Bush asked both parties to resume into negotiations without playing the intifada blame game. Through the 2001 Mitchell Report with the headings, "Resume Negotiations", "End the Violence", and "Rebuild Confidence", he suggested for Israel to freeze all settlement activities to which Palestine agreed but no implementation followed. In

the 2006 election of Hamas representative Ismail Haniyeh as Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority, Bush willfully called for a change in Palestinian leadership and announced that a Palestinian reform is a prerequisite for any movement on conflict resolution. Here, the US in the person of Bush utilized its superpower status in manipulating and making Palestine (the weaker party) “feel that they cannot reject a powerful, biased mediator for fear of the consequences of saying no to such a superpower and moving them even closer” to Israel (Eriksson, 2019).

Following Bush into presidency was Barack H. Obama (2009-17). As a superpower, the US can leverage its material and economic capabilities either as potential incentives or sanctions to guide the negotiations (Eriksson, 2019). Obama was both a formulator and an indefatigable manipulator. As a means of talking Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu into a de facto freeze on settlement construction in East Jerusalem, Obama extended an additional \$205 million military aid to Israel above the \$3 billion annual aid to help it with its Iron Dome Anti-Missile System against rocket attacks from Gaza and Lebanon (Freedman, 2012). Further, he asked Netanyahu to extend the settlement construction moratorium in exchange of an additional F-35 stealth fighter jets, a security treaty between the US and Israel, and a pledge to save Israel in the UNSC against the establishment of a Palestinian state (Freedman, 2012). Obama’s remark saying “the US will never ask Israel to do anything that undermines its security” (Freedman, 2012; p. 63) was just icing on the cake. US’s bias toward Israel was already exposed through the superpower’s endowment of more carrot than stick to the dominant party in the conflict.

The incumbent administration of Donald J. Trump (2017-) reified the position of the US in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At the outset of his term, he brazenly announced Jerusalem as the new capital of Israel and moved the US embassy thereafter. The PA responded by severing ties with the superpower. Employing stick over carrot (as opposed to Israel’s carrot approach), Trump cut off US’ bilateral economic assistance to Palestine for boycotting the administration’s peace efforts. Early this year, he revealed his peace plan titled “Deal of the Century” authored by his Jewish son-in-law Jared Kushner who maintains close ties with Israeli PM Netanyahu. Among the plan’s partial provisions are a) Jerusalem will remain Israel’s undivided capital, b) Israel will maintain control of all borders, c) Israel will retain all settlements in the West Bank and the IDF will have access to isolated settlements, and d) only a limited number of Palestinian refugees will be allowed to return to Palestine but not in Israel.

Conclusion

A superpower mediator with strong links to either party can indeed jeopardize the peace process; but it can utilize its status by influencing the ally to make concessions toward lasting peace. The US could have done this with Israel had it adhered to the concept of neutrality throughout the conflict resolution. However, due to several factors, US mediation went awry in all levels. First, albeit having the best leverage to address dis/nonagreements, the US exhibited noncommittal to a just and fair peace settlement. The carrot and stick approach was employed adversely leading to a cul-de-sac. Instead of assuring the weaker party that no solution will be granted that is detrimental to them, the US built their own peace plans that are favorable to Israel at the expense of Palestine. Second, US hegemonic agenda in the Middle East underpins its strong bilateral relations with Israel that prove to be harmful to the peace process. Alongside Israel’s uncompromising position in the peace settlement is the US’ outpouring of support to the former’s destructive policies. Palestine is unyielding, even in the face of domestic immiseration and violence. Last, although a big

chunk of the futile attempt is and can be attributed to US-Israel relations, it is equally important and relevant to underline both parties' lack of resolve and commitment to put an end to a near-century animosity.

It has already been established that the US will never be an honest broker for the Palestinians. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution has only two paths should it remain under US mediation: a stalemate and a further outbreak of war.

According to Prof. Khalidi (2013),

“The United States for many decades has behaved in a thoroughly one-sided manner that has been highly pernicious to Palestinian rights and aspirations.”

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