

The Quest for an Honest Broker in the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process

Dr. Lior Lehrs*

The article was [published by Public Seminar](#) on 7 June 2018

Much has been said and written on President Donald Trump's controversial statement on Jerusalem on December 6, 2017. But there was one sentence in the speech that everyone – the conflicting parties and the international community – could agree on: “It would be folly to assume that repeating the exact same formula would now produce a different or better result.” Trump was talking about U.S. policy on Jerusalem, but other international actors have suggested changing other basic elements, including in the structure of the peace process itself. Over recent months, there has been an increase in the number of voices within diplomatic discourse challenging the monopoly of the U.S. as the exclusive mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. These same voices are pushing toward creating a new mediation framework.

The EU's top diplomat, Federica Mogherini, declared several times that “no credible talks and negotiation between the Israelis and the Palestinians will happen if it is imagined as a U.S. only effort, but also [...] no effort will ever bring the two sides at the table if the international multilateral framework does not include the U.S.” That goes well with the Palestinian claim after Trump's Jerusalem statement that the U.S. can no longer play the role of an “honest broker” (not that the Palestinians have ever considered the U.S. an honest broker, they simply accepted its role, realizing that only the U.S. could pressure Israel). And it follows the Palestinian campaign for a new international multilateral framework that will sponsor the peace process. We see more international actors proposing their involvement and suggesting themselves as the new possible brokers. Russia, for example, declared readiness to become “an honest mediator” and to host Israeli-Palestinian talks. China launched a four-point peace plan and invited Israeli and Palestinian delegations to a peace symposium in Beijing. This could also be seen as part of a larger process of decreasing the power and involvement of the U.S. in the Middle East, and it also fits the vision of “America First.” The current international order and power balance is very different than when the Israel-Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) peace process was constructed in the nineties.

On the other hand, the U.S. is not giving up its leading role so fast and Vice President Mike Pence stressed that the U.S. must play a “preeminent role” as a peace broker and the Trump administration claims that it is still working on the “ultimate deal.” Israel rejected the idea and Netanyahu clarified that “there is no substitute for the U.S.” In January 2017 we had a reminder of the Israeli government's policy of objecting to any other broker when France initiated a peace conference and Israel refused to participate calling it a “rigged conference.”

* Dr. Lior Lehrs is an Israel Institute postdoctoral fellow at the Taub Center for Israel Studies at New York University. He was a Visiting Scholar at The Johns Hopkins University's Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies and he is a Fellow at the Mitvim Institute.

The U.S. sponsorship of the Israel-PLO peace process is a long-standing fundamental principle since the Oslo Accord of September 1993. Even though at some stages, when both parties were genuinely serious about reaching an agreement (unlike the situation today), they were able to achieve progress without the U.S. (for example, in the Oslo negotiations in 1993 and in Olmert-Abbas talks in 2008). The first voices for a larger framework came after the failure of the 1999-2001 final status negotiations process and the outbreak of the second intifada. Shlomo Ben-Ami, a key figure in these negotiations, claimed that "U.S. hegemony bordered on fanaticism anytime participation of others was mentioned." Ben-Ami supported the creation of an international support framework and called on the Americans to internationalize the Clinton Parameters of December 2000. The Europeans were frustrated by not being a part of the process and felt that they were called upon only for economic assistance (the old word play of the EU as a "payer" and not a "player"). The Clinton administration was also criticized for excluding the Arab world and only approaching Arab leaders at a very late stage during the July 2000 Camp David summit.

In 2002, these thoughts were translated into action and the Middle East Quartet was established, which included the U.S., Russia, the EU, and the United Nations. The Quartet had a role in formulating the Road Map (April 2003) that was later endorsed as a UN Security Council resolution 1515 (November 2003). Eventually the Quartet was revealed to be a weak and insignificant actor that was mainly backing and assisting the U.S. and was focused on economic and institutional development in the Palestinian Authority. The Quartet did not play an important role during John Kerry's peace talks (2013-2014) and the decision in July 2016 of its members to publish a report that would pave the way forward had no real effect. The idea that the U.S. and the Quartet would outline a U.N. Security Council resolution, with the parameters for resolving the conflict (which was in the diplomatic air during the Obama period) was never manifested. The recent discussions are suggesting a whole new ballgame.

The idea of a multiparty mediation framework is not new and not unique to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. During the war in Bosnia (1992-1995), the Contact Group (U.S., Russia, France, Britain, and Germany) played a significant role and laid out the formula that eventually led to the Dayton Agreement (1995). In the early nineties, the five members of the UN Security Council developed a framework to assist with the peace process in Cambodia, and the "guarantor states" (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and the U.S.) were instrumental in the Ecuador-Peru peace process.

There is no one model of a multiparty mediation framework which can differ in size, structure, and level of coordination among the members as well as in the division of responsibilities in the peacemaking process. This tool can also be used at specific stages in the process and there can be different roles for "the lead mediator" and the mediation group at different phases.

Scholarship in the field (such as the research of Crocker, Hampson and Aall as well as of Vukovic) has highlighted some of disadvantages of this mechanism. Not only can it complicate the process, making it less efficient but the inclusion of a greater number of actors means the addition of more voices and interests. It can also lead to confusion and mixed signals. On the other hand, a multiparty mediation framework has important advantages. It can increase leverage resources and give better access to, and exert more influence on, various parties in the conflict, especially when there is no one agreed upon broker. It can be perceived as more balanced, create greater international legitimacy, and

enlarge the peace coalition. In short, the level of success depends on the ability of the members to create a synchronized and coherent mediation process.

What kind of multiparty mechanism would work best and who should be part of it? Mogherini emphasized the need to add regional players, such as Jordan and Egypt. Both Israel and the PLO as well as the U.S. agree on the importance of the regional framework. In 2015, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius called for an “international support group” formed by Arab states, the EU and UN Security Council members. The Palestinians mentioned the model of “P5+1,” which includes China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the U.S. Norway was mentioned due to its historical role in the process. The enlargement of the framework should also help in addressing the delicate Gaza question in addition to Palestinian Authority-Israel relations.

At this point it is hard to know whether a multiparty mechanism is just an idea that will continue to float in the diplomatic air and which will not be translated into significant change, or if it is the beginning of groundbreaking change in the peace process. It is hard to predict if actors will step up and promote this move, even at the risk of confrontation with the U.S. and Israel. It is especially unpredictable at a time of multiple crises around the globe, and various points of disagreement and tension between the international community and the Trump administration. The process will also be affected by developments in the Israeli-Palestinian situation (including the domestic dynamic on each side) and by the Trump administration’s insistence on moving forward with the peace plan.

Since Trump’s Jerusalem statement, the tension in the Israeli-Palestinian arena has been on the rise. The situation in the West Bank is still under control, but many fear escalation and the deteriorating situation in Gaza is threatening to explode (the recent Israel-Gaza escalation and flare-up in the last days were the worst since the war in summer 2014). Conflict situations under these conditions, with no mediator acceptable to both sides and no direct channels between the leadership, are very dangerous and risky. John Kerry failed in his attempt in 2013-2014 to achieve a framework agreement, but he played an important role during delicate and dangerous crises in Jerusalem. The question is who will be able to play this role in case of another escalation.