



New Opportunities for American Contributions to Transforming Israeli-Palestinian Relations

Prof. Louis Kriesberg*

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New circumstances within the U.S. and the Middle East open a window for a more effective American role in transforming the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is a role that must convey a sense of being somewhat new, and not a rehash of old and sadly failed policies. It should include: greater U.S. recognition to the Palestinian representatives and their constituencies' concerns, the re-branding of the concept of peace, increased support to non-governmental conflict transformation initiatives, and the establishment of procedures and institutions to deal with future conflicts.

The tragic Israeli-Palestinian relations and the many failed U.S. attempts to mediate an end to their violent-prone conflict does not appear to provide much hope that the new effort will succeed. Nevertheless, there are new circumstances within the U.S. and the Middle East region that open a window for an effective broad American role in transforming the painful Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

First, within the U.S. there is a growing sense that the threats from Islamic political extremists are bolstered by what they regard as the U.S. support of Israel and its occupation of Palestinian lands. It is in American vital interests to diminish those claims by assisting Palestinians and Israelis to reach a mutually acceptable accommodation. Responsible U.S. leaders recognize that this is important for international and domestic considerations.

Furthermore, the Jewish-American community, an influential portion of the American electorate, is decreasingly committed to unquestionably supporting Israeli policies toward Palestinians that serve grandiose nationalist Israeli ambitions. The rapid growth of J-Street illustrates the interest in a two-state solution to preserve a democratic Israel. In addition, the present Democratic president, Barack Obama, and his administration can claim close ties and high support for Israel, but not guided by neoconservative

* Louis Kriesberg is Professor Emeritus of Sociology, Maxwell Professor Emeritus of Social Conflict Studies, and founding director of the Program on the Analysis and Resolution of Conflicts, all at Syracuse University, USA. He is known as one of the founders of conflict theory and his work on constructive conflicts continues to shape conflict analysis and strategy. This paper is based on a talk given at The Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration (PARCC) at Syracuse University.

ideological blinders. This helps free U.S. mediation to be more even-handed than it often has been.

Regional changes also can contribute incentives to Israeli and Palestinian leaders to negotiate a mutually acceptable settlement. The Arab uprisings in many countries create a common threat of entangling Israelis, Palestinians and neighboring Arab governments, if a peaceful accommodation between Israelis and Palestinians is not achieved. Furthermore, the focus on domestic affairs in many of the Arab countries in the present circumstances weakens Arab attention and concern for Palestinians, encouraging Palestinians to settle as best they can now. The domestic focus also can be viewed as providing the Israelis with some degree of security, which reduces risks from making accommodations with Palestinians.

Importantly, the Arab League modified its 2002 peace offer to Israel, at the start of the current U.S. mediation initiative. Initially, it pledged normalized relations and full recognition if Israel withdrew completely from the occupied territories seized in 1967. Now it made the offer that Israel could retain pieces of the West Bank if matched by land swaps with the Palestinians. This Arab Peace Initiative offers Mahmoud Abbas political cover for such a compromise and promises Israel a comprehensive peace with the members of the Arab League.

In addition, Iran's new government raises the possibility of a transformation of the antagonistic relations between Iran and Israel. As the new government negotiates new relations with the U.S. and other Western countries, in addition to nuclear weapons programs, matters relating to support of organizations antagonistic to Israel will be discussed and Iranian policies are likely to be changed. Obviously, if Israel reaches an accommodation with the Palestinians, a major issue in contention between Israel and Iran would be overcome.

The civil war in Syria removes a significant military threat to Israel. The re-entry of Russia, as an important actor in the Middle East, is a possible ally in countering Islamic political extremists and therefore can help ease the problems in reaching a mutually acceptable Israeli-Palestinian accommodation.

Given these circumstances, there is a chance for a broad American effort to contribute to a significant peaceful transformation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It would entail non-official as well as official efforts and contributions. The peacemaking effort must convey a sense of being somewhat new, and not a rehash of old and sadly failed policies.

A comprehensive American mediation program would naturally include a variety of non-governmental organizations. Many of them have long been active in providing humanitarian assistance, supporting economic development and doing conflict resolution work. Many of them should be expanded to help build the constructive relations needed for both peoples to support and implement a negotiated agreement when it is reached. Strong support from Israeli Jews and Palestinians will be needed to

override the efforts of some people on each side who will try to obstruct and disrupt the peaceful conflict transformation that has already begun.

These American-supported and conducted transnational undertakings include inter-communal workshops and dialogue groups and also training and education about conflict resolution and conflict transformation, for example as pursued by Search for Common Ground. There also are programs to support economic development by establishing cooperative activities by Israeli Jews and Palestinians, as is being done by the Near East Foundation. Support is also being given to organizations that help in track-two diplomacy, nonofficial channels that supplement official ones. All these activities are important in ultimately validating and implementing any agreements that may be reached.

In recent years, non-governmental organizations have been formed in solidarity with Palestinians. They may act in protective roles for Palestinians living in areas under Israeli military control or in ways to assist economic development. However, some solidarity work entails imposing punitive sanctions against Israelis. These can be counterproductive by raising Israeli fears that the State of Israel's legitimacy or even existence is threatened. Boycotts against meeting Israeli academics also can be counterproductive by shutting off avenues for building interpersonal ties and alliances to support a constructive transformation of the conflict.

A comprehensive, constructive mediating effort by the U.S. government would also include some new perspectives and policies by the U.S. government. Consider the very concept of peace. It should be understood to mean more than the absence of acts of violence. It might be understood to include mutually acceptable ways to handle inevitable conflicts and some goodly amount of fairness and equity; in other words, some degree of mutual security and mutual justice.

One way to help bring about such a peace is to demonstrate respectfulness to the primary adversaries. This is particularly important in relationship to the Palestinians and their leaders. Greater recognition to the Palestinian representatives and their constituencies' concerns would be inherently valuable, as well as make for better outcomes. One step in this might be to appoint a U.S. emissary or envoy to the Palestinian Authority who could provide another direct channel of communication. Relatedly, it would be helpful of American media provided more opportunities for Palestinians to present their views and thinking about the way to transform the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

As part of the mediating process, the U.S. team might also encourage and help leaders on each side of the conflict to demonstrate their respect for each other and for the values and symbols they each hold dear. Each side should recognize what kinds of words and acts members of the other side would experience as dishonoring and disrespectful.

Of course a great deal of economic assistance will be needed to construct a viable Palestinian State. But that should not be presented in a manner that Palestinians would regard as a bribe to sell out what they regard as sacred. Research indicates that when people believe that that is what they are being offered, they feel it would be dishonorable to take the offer, and reject it.

Finally, any comprehensive agreement that may be reached should be accompanied by steps to establish procedures and institutions to deal with future ongoing conflicts. These may include regional and bilateral arrangements, incorporating cooperative activities and conflict resolution procedures to manage inevitable disputes. Such procedures and institutions could function in many arenas, such as water usage, security provisions, access to holy places, and assistance to Palestinian refugees.

Hope that a peaceful constructive transformation of the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be achieved may seem naïve under present circumstances, but to abandon all hope will ensure that it will not be achieved. It is possible. The alternatives would be dreadful.