

Donald Trump and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Written by Raphael Cohen-Almagor

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RAPHAEL COHEN-ALMAGOR, MAR 10 2017

It is not a secret that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's worldview is much akin to that of the American Republican Party than to that of the Democratic Party. He welcomed Donald Trump to the White House with clear delight. For the next few years, so he thinks, he will not have to suffer when meeting the American president. It is common knowledge that Netanyahu's relationships with President Obama were strenuous. Obama remained a friend of Israel despite Benjamin Netanyahu, not because of him. Trump is another opera altogether.

While we do not know much about Trump the politician, during his controversial presidential campaign he made a number of statements that suggest:

- Trump is a friend of Israel.
- Trump has strong reservations about the Muslim world as he seems to think that Islam is the source of the majority of modern terrorism. Muslim terror targets the West at large and the USA in particular. The USA under President Trump is at odds with Islam.
- Trump voiced his ambition to succeed where so many people before him had failed. He would like to bring peace to the Middle East. He declared his wish to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- Trump's team, composed by the president, does not pretend to be an unbiased broker. Most of the team is on the side of Israel. Period.

Trump is a new phenomenon in world politics. He is the first president since *Dwight D. ("Ike") Eisenhower* who came to this role without prior experience in politics. Thus we learn the Trumpism phenomenon while it is in the making. It is fair to say that Trump is not an expert on Middle Eastern affairs. He is aware of some of the intricacies of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but he does not claim to be well versed in all of them. It seems that he is willing and open to learn. Being open to learning facts and details might not lead to overhauling Trump's worldview but it might bring him to reconsider certain positions. Trump, the experienced businessman and the green politician, understands success and failure. He also knows the difference between declarations and actions. Words are cheap. Actions can be very costly. What one says in an election campaign in order to be elected does not necessarily materialize. Since coming to the White House, Trump realizes that it might be difficult to make certain ideas a reality. Some of the issues are more difficult than he assumed. Jerusalem is one of them.

Jerusalem

Trump said he will move the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. He appointed an ambassador to Israel who is supportive of this move. Then he started preparing his homework and realized that the issue is more complex than what he initially thought. If American lives will be lost as a result of the decision, Trump will be perceived irresponsible. At the very least, he needs to show that he has devoted some attention to detail, that he carefully made calculations and then had cast his decision. As an aspiring politician one can make many irresponsible declarations. As a president, one needs to be far more careful.

Words of the American president carry much weight, far more weight than Trump had initially realized. Trump understands finance and money. Only now he is starting to learn that in politics finance is only one facet of the complex matrix that defines the role of the American president in today's world.

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I support the decision to move the American embassy and all other embassies to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the eternal capital of Israel. The capital is not Tel Aviv. Embassies should be in the state capital. I find the debate somewhat hypocritical. The United States, the United Kingdom and other countries have missions in charge of Palestinian affairs in East Jerusalem. They can have Embassies in charge of their relationships with Israel in West Jerusalem. This move won't undermine the idea of two-state solution that speaks of dividing Jerusalem not only *de facto* but also *de jure*. The city is already divided. Go to Jerusalem and witness the separate Palestinian neighborhoods. They look very different compared to the Jewish neighbourhoods.

According to the vision of two-state solution, East Jerusalem will be the capital of Palestine. West Jerusalem will be the capital of Israel.[i] Alternatively, Jerusalem will be declared an international area, holy and respected by all religions, and jointly administered by Israel and Palestine, or by the international community at large. With good will and innovative mind, a solution can be found. The problem is that while Israel is rich with innovation, it is short with good will. Palestine also lacks good will. Mistrust undermines the process.

Testing Trump

In the first month of Trump's presidency, the Israeli leadership has put Trump to test, wanting to taste the water and examine his reaction. A mere few days after Trump's inauguration, the Israeli government approved the construction of some 5,500 new homes in the West Bank and East Jerusalem settlements. At first, both the White House and the State Department demurred when asked for an official comment. But following some days of reflection, the White House voiced its continued commitment to a two-state solution, saying that unilateral steps to enlarge settlements undermine President Trump's efforts to forge peace.

Yet the Israeli government and Knesset (Parliament) continue with settlement construction undeterred. The Trump statement has made no impact on them. They do not think that Trump will behave like President Obama with whom they had clear disagreement. They think President Trump belongs to their own camp; the camp of Eretz Yisrael Hashlema that believes in preserving the whole land of Israel for the Jewish people. On February 6, 2017, they put Trump to the test again.

The Legalization Bill

In February 2017, the Israeli Knesset passed the Legalization Bill which retroactively legalizes 55 settlement outposts and nearly 4000 housing units built on land privately owned by Palestinians in the West Bank. The original landowners to be compensated either with money or alternative land – even if they do not agree to give up their property. These outposts and buildings are illegal under existing Israeli law as well as under international law. This move damages both the chances of peace and Israel's standing in the world. Israel's opposition leader, Isaac Herzog, described the law as “a very serious danger” to Israel. The law was also condemned by human rights organisations saying that PM Netanyahu is “willing to compromise the future of both Israelis and Palestinians in order to satisfy a small group of extreme settlers for the sake of his own political survival”. Israeli human rights group B'Tselem said that the law was merely “another facet of the massive land grab carried out openly for decades” by Israeli authorities in the occupied Palestinian territory. UN envoy for the Middle East peace process Nickolay Mladenov said the bill set a “very dangerous precedent”. Israel's close ally, Germany, urged Israel to reconsider its position in unusually strong language. A German Foreign Ministry spokesman voiced concern, saying that the bill violates international law and it undermines its commitment to finding a two-state solution. The law was also condemned by the European Union, France, Britain, Turkey, Jordan and the Palestinians. The United States, however, has refused to comment. White House spokesman Sean Spicer merely said that the issue will be discussed by President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu.

This is the first time the Israeli Knesset legislates in the occupied Palestinian lands and particularly on property issues. The law opens the gate for the full annexation of the West Bank and therefore undermines substantially the two-state solution. The law could open Israel up to potential prosecution at the International Criminal Court.

50 Years of Occupation

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2017 marks the 50th anniversary of the Six Day War, the war that brought about the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights. In 1981, Israel annexed the Golan Heights. In 2005, Israel evacuated Gaza and a year later Hamas took over. Israel is still occupying the West Bank.

The word “occupation” is almost non-existent in the Israeli discourse. Israelis live in denial, refusing to see that they subject another people to horrible reality, reality they themselves would not have liked to experience even for one single day. Their self-denial enables them to continue a regime that is based on coercion and injustice.

Like Old Cato, I have been saying for more than thirty years: the occupation must stop. It is vile. It is inhumane. It undermines Palestinian existence, and it also undermines Israel. The occupation negates Jewish humanity. It negates freedom. It negates democracy.

I am yearning for a solution that would put an end to the occupation and bring closer the idea of a two-state solution. Israel will continue to suffer from terror and bloodshed as long as the occupation continues.

Trump-Netanyahu Meeting

On February 15, 2017, Trump met Netanyahu in the White House. Netanyahu is one of the first world leaders Trump has met as president, suggesting the mutual interests Israel and the USA have in delineating a roadmap for their relationship in the near future. Because Trump is so fresh, so unexpected, one might have developed hopes that Trump may succeed where so many others have failed and bring peace to the Middle East. These hopes suffered a major blow following the leaders' meeting.

For the long-serving, experienced Netanyahu, it was the first time to meet a Republican president in the White House. His body language showed just how relaxed, indeed relieved, he was, to meet a brother for his uncompromising worldview. Netanyahu met a person whom he knows for some time, a friend, someone who understands him even before he starts talking. Trump would not push Israel to do things it does not want. Not now. Possibly not ever. At least, there is no reason to suggest he will. That means that Israel will have its way, and the Palestinians will be pressed hard onto a dark corner. They would not like it. They would resist. They would inflict pain on Israel. And they, the Palestinians, would suffer. Greatly.

Is this a solution? Certainly it is not a long-term solution. There is only that much that you can do with bayonets. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict will continue to bleed. Minister of Education Naftali Bennett, whose worldview dictates the agenda nowadays, tweeted: “This is the end of an era... The Palestinian flag has come down and has been replaced by the Israeli flag. The prime minister displayed leadership and daring and strengthened Israel's security”.

Bennett indicated the target, saying that “only with a complete victory can we put an end to this cycle” of violence. Now, what does he mean by “complete victory”? Your answer is as good as mine. How this complete victory will be achieved? My imagination plays brutal tricks on me, bringing me to reflect on dark days I wish I could forget.

At the joint press conference with Prime Minister Netanyahu, President Trump quipped in a smug tone:

So, I'm looking at two-state and one-state and I like the one that both parties like. I'm very happy with the one that both parties like. I can live with either one. I thought for a while the two-state looked like it may be the easier of the two but honestly, if Bibi and if the Palestinians – if Israel and the Palestinians are happy, I'm happy with the one they like the best.

This is an extraordinary presidential phrase. It sounds like a pub talk between two friends than a supposedly serious press conference. It suggests that President Trump has little clue regarding the complexities of the conflict and that he is taking his responsibilities as US president very lightly, not realizing the enormity of his influence and the potential impact of his words. Two-state and one-state solutions are very different. They are world apart. Lumping them together as if one is saying: “I don't mind playing basketball or football” or “I am easy about choosing beer or wine for the meal”. This attitude tells you that the president can't be serious in his intention to solve the conflict. To

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think that Trump assumes that “Bibi and the Palestinians” (does Trump know who is the Palestinian leader?) can agree and be “happy” about any solution tells you that President Trump is disconnected from reality.

In the same light-hearted tone, President Trump related to the settlements obstacle, advising “Bibi”: “As far as settlements, I’d like to see you hold back on settlements for a little bit”. This was the harshest reprimand President Trump was able to utter. Israel can do that. It can hold back on settlements for just a little bit. In return, Netanyahu asked Trump to give official American recognition to Israel’s sovereignty over the Golan Heights.

Three Options

In the event that the Trump administration would decide to get itself seriously involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it can push to one of three options:

- it can accept the right-wing Israeli *idealistic option* that would bolster Israel at the expense of Palestine;
- It can try to push for the *optimal option* of confederation;
- It can push for the still most *realistic and least violent option* of a two-state solution.

The Right-Wing Israeli Idealistic Option

Netanyahu, who was, is and will remain Eretz Yisrael Hashlema person (a person who believes in preserving the whole land of Israel) but who loves power and wishes to be perceived as “pragmatic” in the international arena, would allow himself to be bolder with his true inclinations. Netanyahu is already pushed to boldness by his own governmental partners, first and foremost Naftali Bennett who does not have Netanyahu’s restraints. Bennett, unlike Netanyahu, does not pretend to be pragmatic, and says what he wants. He wants to annex the occupied territories. He does acknowledge that this is a complicated matter; thus he aims to do this step by step: first annexing the major bulks of settlements, which amount to 20% of the West Bank. Then he will aim to annex Area C, which amounts to more than 50% of the West Bank, leaving the Palestinians with a very small piece of land[i].

The Palestinians would not like taking their land. But Bennet believes this is the right thing to do. With Trump as Israel’s guardian, the Palestinian objection is insignificant. Still the Palestinians are likely to resort to terror as they did in the past. Israel, with its chosen policies, is destined to live by its sword for many years to come. This is not the most pleasing future for its children.

The Optimal Option: Confederations

The West Bank and Gaza are small in size and population, and they are geographically apart. In order to make Palestine a viable state, they need outside support. There are several options:

With Jordan (West Bank). Jordan and the Palestinian West Bank would agree to establish a federation. The West Bank was part of Jordan until the 1967 Six Day War. The West Bank is one the other side of the Jordan River thus geographic contiguity.

With Egypt (Gaza and the West Bank).

With Israel, Egypt and Jordan (The New Middle East).[ii]

In terms of viability, there is no doubt that some form of confederation will better serve the Palestinian interest. However, at present this is a far-fetched proposal. Jordan, Egypt and Israel do not rush to establish such a confederation. This option can become realistic only when there is quiet, trust and good will of all concerned nations. These three ingredients, quiet, trust and good will are scarce at present. The USA can play a great role in bringing the parties together, offer attractive incentives and pave the way forward to an optimal solution.

The Realistic and Less Bloody Option: Two-State Solution

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This is the most just solution. I have been campaigning for a two-state solution since 2012, and explained the reasons why this solution is fair and just in a number of articles which the reader is welcome to read.[iv] I do not wish to repeat the reasoning here. I believe that peace is a precious commodity and therefore it requires both parties to pay a high price for its achievement, reaching a solution that is agreeable to both. The peace deal should be attractive to both Israel and Palestine, equally. It cannot be one-sided, enforced or coerced. A two-state solution is the only viable, long-term solution from which both sides can profit. While the strategy is to reach that solution, the tactics for reaching it need to address present realities and new complexities that are the result of the latest round of hostilities between Israel and Hamas.

At present it is impossible to see the two rivals sitting together and reaching a comprehensive agreement that will settle all disputes and declare an end to hostilities. There is too much hostility, suspicion and bad blood between the two parties. What is needed is a series of steps to build trust and good will that will pave the way to the negotiation table.

The two major obstacles to peace are the build-up of settlements by Israel, and Palestinian terrorism. These two issues were not adequately tackled in any previous negotiations. The result is the present mess of continued violence. Until these issues are comprehensively addressed, the peace wagon will remain stuck and unmoved.

Israel and the Palestinian Authority are either unwilling or unable to stop settlement growth and continued acts of terror and violence. Thus what is required is the involvement of third-parties in the conflict. Third parties should shoulder efforts to tackle these issues, closely coordinating their constructive trust-building steps. The third parties should include the United States, and the Arab League.[v] The Palestinian Authority is too weak and too fragile to address the conflict successfully with its very modest means. The PA needs the assistance, legitimacy and capabilities of a greater power that has some vested interest in resolving the conflict. Until now, the US was unable to deliver the goods on its own. The Arab League cannot carry the burden alone. But coordinated efforts of the USA and the Arab League to build trust by addressing the major hurdles may prove successful, leading Israel and the PA to a better, positive future.

In an atmosphere that is not derailed by either settlement buildup or by terror, further constructive steps can be made. Granted that there will be spoilers on both sides. There will be settlers who will try to create facts on the ground, and there will be terrorists who will continue in their attempts to throw both parties into another round of violence. The important thing is a firm stand by both Israel and the PA against such spoilers. Explicit and unequivocal condemnation and firm actions against spoilers is needed. No shred of legitimacy should be conferred on them, raising a clear and loud voice about Israel and PA's commitment to peace. With this frame of mind, with resolute commitment to pave a new horizon for their respective people, it will be possible to make further steps that will provide a momentum for peace. These steps may include agreements on allocation of water resources,[vi] on fishing in their respective territorial waters, slow but steady release of prisoners, evacuation of isolated Israeli settlements, and the introduction of significant changes in the Israeli and Palestinian education curriculum, emphasizing good neighborhood, pluralism and diversity, acknowledging the differences of culture and religion, with utmost respect for the tradition of each other and with the view that these traditions can be levers for tranquil co-existence.[vii] In every age group vital concepts for understanding the other will be studied. This program is critical for establishing peaceful relationships and trust between the two parties.[viii]

Conclusion

To resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict there is a need for courageous decision-makers who seize the opportunities presented to them and make the most for their peoples. As a shrewd businessman, President Trump knows that high stakes require high efforts and investment.

For such a momentous achievement of resolving a deep, entrenched conflict, three things are absolutely essential:

- An Israeli leader who is committed to bring peace to his people and is willing to pay the necessary price;
- A Palestinian leader who is committed to bring peace to his people and is willing to pay the necessary price;

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- Shared belief by both leaders that the time is ripe for peace. By “time is ripe” it is meant that both leaders believe that enough blood was shed, that they need to seize the moment because things might worsen for their people, and that they have the ability to lead their respective people to accept the peace agreement and change reality for the better.

President Trump can instill a sense of urgency in Israel and Palestine. He has the ability to assist in building trust, goodwill and security. The United States has the capabilities to consolidate economic conditions for Palestinians; bolster security on both sides; enshrine insistence on zero tolerance regarding all forms of violence; stop Israel from enlarging existing settlements; provide assurances for Israel so it could safely dismantle checkpoints to make the lives of Palestinian civilians easier, and involve the international community in the trust-building process. The road is long and trying but the potential reward is worthy of all efforts. With true commitment to achieve peace in our lifetime, President Trump the bulldozer may succeed in fulfilling a much-desired dream, creating a new chapter in the history of Israel and Palestine in which children can grow up liking each other, recognizing the many similarities that exist between them, and replacing the sword with a plough.

Notes

[i] See The Clinton Parameters – Clinton Proposal on Israeli-Palestinian Peace

[ii] For a map of the Occupied Palestinian Territory see <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/west-bank-area-c-map-february-2011>. For more maps on this issue see the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs: Occupied Palestinian Territory website at <https://www.ochaopt.org/maps>.

[iii] For more on this see Giora Eiland, “*Regional Alternatives to the Idea of Two States for Two People*”, BASA Center Publications (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 2010, Hebrew); Benny Morris, “*One State, Two States*” (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

[iv] See for example Raphael Cohen-Almagor, “*Two-State Solution – The Way Forward*”, Annual Review of Law and Ethics, Vol. 20 (2012): 381-395; R. Cohen-Almagor, “*Breaking the Israeli-Palestinian Deadlock – Two State Solution*”, Global Education Magazine: International Day of Peace (September 21, 2014): 58-63 and “*Breaking the Israeli-Palestinian Deadlock*”, Retos International, Vol. 5, No. 11 (2014); R. Cohen-Almagor, “*Suggestions for Israeli-Palestinian Agreement*”, New Directions (Kivunim Hadashim), No.30 (June 2014): 144-159 (Hebrew) and “*Resolvendo o Conflito Israelense-Palestino – uma Solução Bi-Estatal*”, Oriente-Se, Vol. 1 (February 2016): 72-79.

[v] See the Arab Peace Initiative 2002

[vi] For the water issue see for example Amjad Aliawi, Enda O’Connell, Geoff Parkin and Karen Assaf, *Palestine Water: between Challenges and Realities*, in Elizabeth G. Matthews (ed.), The Israel-Palestine Conflict (London: Routledge, 2011): 114-138; Hillel Shuval, “*Is the Conflict over Shared Water Resources between Israelis and Palestinians an Obstacle to Peace?*”, in Elizabeth G. Matthews (ed.), The Israel-Palestine Conflict: 93-113.

[vii] For culture, education and peace, see for example Salem Aweiss, “*Culture of Peace and Education*”, in Elizabeth G. Matthews (ed.), The Israel-Palestine Conflict: 224-246; Daniel Bar-Tal, “*Challenges for Constructing Peace Culture and Peace Education*”, in Elizabeth G. Matthews (ed.), The Israel-Palestine Conflict: 209-223.

[viii] For further discussion, see Jay Rothman, *From Confrontation to Cooperation* (London: Sage Publications, 1992).

About the author:

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Raphael Cohen-Almagor is an educator, researcher and human rights activist. He received his DPhil in political theory from Oxford University and presently is a Professor of Politics at University of Hull, UK. He was Fulbright-Yitzhak Rabin Visiting Professor at UCLA School of Law, Visiting Professor at Johns Hopkins University, and Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Raphael has founded several organizations, including Israel's "Second Generation to the Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance" Organization; The University of Haifa Center for Democratic Studies; The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute Medical Ethics Think-tank, and The University of Hull Middle East Study Group. Among his more recent books are *Speech, Media and Ethics* (2001, 2005), *Israeli Democracy at the Crossroads* (2005); *Israeli Institutions at the Crossroads* (2005); *The Scope of Tolerance* (2006), *The Democratic Catch* (2007, Hebrew), *Voyages* (2007, poetry, Hebrew), *Public Responsibility in Israel* (with Ori Arbel-Ganz and Asa Kasher 2012, Hebrew) and *Confronting the Internet's Dark Side* (2015). Raphael is the author of a widely read and often cited blog about politics in the Mideast called "ISRAEL: Democracy, Human Rights, Politics and Society" and can be followed on Twitter: @almagor35.