The Imponderables of Middle Eastern Diplomacy

https://www.e-ir.info/2017/11/12/the-imponderables-of-middle-eastern-diplomacy/

STEPHEN CHAN, NOV 12 2017

This is an except from *Meditations on Diplomacy: Comparative Cases in Diplomatic Practice and Foreign Policy* – an open access book by Stephen Chan. Available now on Amazon (UK, USA, Ca, Ger, Fra), in all good book stores and via a free PDF download.

Find out more about E-IR's range of open access books

Apart from the *rapprochement* with China, Henry Kissinger would probably best view his record with Egypt and Israel in mind – helping to consolidate the post-1973 'peace' between the two, and setting into motion the US policy of copious foreign aid, with huge military resources as a key feature, so that neither state could maintain their security apparatus and ambitions without the US. This crafted a dependency, but also a balance of power between Israel and Egypt – one in which Israel always had a slightly greater arsenal – but the tilt in the balance was never enough to tip the scales. It reflected the typical Kissinger-esque love of the concert as a means of executing international relations; only this Middle Eastern concert could not be played without constant reference to the US. It might have consolidated the peace between two states; it did nothing to solve the vexatious problems of the region, especially that between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

There is some irony in that Kissinger's latest (and probably last) book, *World Order*, sub-titled *Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History*, reveals that he has learned little from the disastrous history of the Middle East since his time in office. The book is essentially a root and branch defence of the Westphalian state. Where it is a somewhat radical book is its open questioning of whether Saudi Arabia is a true Westphalian state, or an Islamic one with a huge range of problems emanating from it into international relations. Kissinger is fearful of an Islamic state system. But, in the same book, he holds up Israel as a properly Westphalian state. It has been nothing of the sort – both expanding its boundaries unilaterally, defying international law and UN resolutions, reneging on agreements, occupying the territory of other states, and refusing to allow statehood to the Palestinians – choosing to occupy and exploit large chunks of Palestinian territory, which Israel had itself agreed to be Palestinian, as if Palestine were the colony of a militarised colonial overlord.

The messy environment for foreign policy and diplomacy

The Arab-Israeli wars

The Balfour Declaration of 1917 proposed the partition of Palestine into two states and one was to be Jewish. This was meant to satisfy the Zionist movement seeking a 'homeland for the Jews'. Early Zionism did not necessarily see this homeland as being located in the Middle East, let alone in the historical area of Biblical Israel. Locations in Africa and South America entered the list of possibilities. But the sense of needing to do something definitive and swiftly for the Jews became an urgency in the wake of World War II, especially in the light of the gigantic atrocities and attempted genocide of the Holocaust. The international community agreed, and the British mandate over Palestine that had begun after World War I, carved out of the defeated Ottoman Empire, was to become a United Nations mandate for the final step towards a new state. There was much confusion during the transition from the British to the UN, and the Palestinian population certainly resisted the process with its *Nakba* or liberation war named after the 'day of catastrophe' when a huge part of the Palestinian population fled the encroaching Jews. Jewish terrorist

movements used violent insurrection to force the pace of independence and, finally, in 1948, Ben Gurion was able to declare the birth of Israel. Almost immediately, the armies of the surrounding Arab states launched a multi-front attack on Israel. This was partly in solidarity with the Palestinians, but also very much to resist what would have been a changed political situation in their region and a great complication to their existing regional balance of power. It would also make part of the Middle East no longer Arabic and no longer Islamic – although, in 1948, the Arabic factor was greater than any Islamic factor. There was a slow motion movement towards modernity – expressed a little later in the seizure of power in Egypt by Nasser and the Free Officers – and the public desire for a new and unified Arabia. Israel was an intrusion upon all these dreams.

The Arab armies were antiquated and very poorly generaled. Nasser himself, as a young officer, became almost legendary simply for refusing to surrender. The Israeli forces were totally victorious and, in the place of the victim who went passively to the gas chambers, the image and the legend of the 'fighting Jew' was born – and has never changed. The ill-advised assault of the Suez Canal zone in 1956, alongside British and French contingents, to ensure Nasser could not nationalise the canal – which was on Egyptian soil – ended in retreat because of strong diplomatic pressure from the US and UN but, once again, when the Israeli and Egyptian forces engaged, the Egyptians lost. With Soviet help, Nasser in response began building a new army with the latest equipment. The tanks looked splendid on the parade ground and the warplanes looked splendid parked in formation on their runways.

They were almost literally in such positions when the Israelis decimated the Egyptian forces and those of Syria in 1967. Much has been made of the precursor manoeuvres of Nasser, in demanding the withdrawal of the UN peacekeeping forces inserted into the Sinai Peninsula as part of the disengagement after 1956. They were meant to act as a buffer force between the Egyptians and the Israelis. Nasser, in 1967, not only demanded they leave but set up his newly equipped army in a display of force facing the Israelis. A recent school of thought suggests that Nasser was setting about a gigantic bluff; he had asked only for the repositioning of the UN force; and his chief concern was that the Israelis were preparing an attack on Syria, which at that time was politically very close to Egypt and there was even popular demand for a unified Egyptian/Syrian State, a United Arab Republic; so Nasser's military display was calibrated to make the Israelis think twice about an attack on Syria, as there would be an Egyptian threat to their rear. In the event, the Israelis called the bluff and simply attacked both – brilliantly and pre-emptively – destroying the Egyptian air-force, meticulously lined up on the runways, and cutting a swathe through the Egyptian tanks that certainly looked intimidating as a display, but which were not in proper battle order. They took all of Sinai right up to the bank of the Suez Canal. On the Syrian front, they took the Golan Heights. Ironically, against the Egyptians the Israelis used German Panzer tactics, pioneered by Guderian in the attack on France, where there was no central focus of their attack. Instead of one spearhead there were multiple arrowheads with tank battalion commanders given huge discretion. Egyptian military doctrine could not have responded in any case.

It was Nasser's successor, Sadat, who was determined in 1973 to recapture the Sinai Peninsula from the Israelis. At the time of Yom Kippur, a Jewish festival, Egyptian troops stormed across the Canal. Pre-empting the Israeli tank tactics of 1967, Sadat's frontline forces were arrayed in small independent units armed with surface-to-surface anti-tank missiles. With no fixed, centrally-directed command, their locations were unpredictable and, as the tanks came forward, nests of Egyptian anti-tank commandos unleashed their missiles. The first stages of the conflict were a huge victory for the Egyptians. The Israeli counter-attack might have succeeded in nullifying this, but emergency diplomacy involving the superpowers, with Kissinger to the fore, imposed a ceasefire. All the same, for the Egyptians it was a huge restoration of morale and self-belief. They regained the Sinai, although it took further diplomacy by Kissinger to complete the process, and there was never another war between Egypt and Israel. The Syrians, however, were never to regain the Golan Heights. Their advancing tanks were halted by concentrated Israeli airstrikes, although for a considerable period the battles waxed and waned, and it must be said there was huge valour and military thought on both sides. Afterwards, both sides used proxies to harass the other, but there was never another war between Israel and Syria.

The Israeli invasions of Lebanon

From 1975 Israel helped organise and support an allied militia, a Maronite Christian militia, led by Major Haddad, in the south of Lebanon. It was to act as a check to Syrian ambitions for influence in Lebanon but also, more

particularly, to establish a buffer zone between Israel and Palestinian forces who, after their ouster from Jordan in the so-called 'Black September' pogroms of 1970-1, had headquartered themselves under the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) umbrella in Lebanon. Jordan had expelled the PLO because of fears that the Palestinian population on Jordanian territory was growing so swiftly there would be a temptation for the PLO simply to seize the Jordanian state and make it their own. Many Israeli strategists were encouraging of this possibility. It would have solved the problem of the Palestinians not having a state, and the 1967 Israeli seizure of the West Bank, up till then the envisaged Palestinian 'homeland', had not been reversed by the Egyptian successes of 1973; so the prospect was that Israel could keep the West Bank with fewer problems if the Palestinians took Jordan. The Jordanian expulsion of the PLO only saw it grow in strength in Lebanon and it became a critical force in Lebanese politics. The harassing and buffer capacities of Haddad's militia aside, it was only a matter of time before the Israelis invaded Lebanon.

They did this in 1978, but were curiously unsuccessful in that the Palestinian forces occupying southern Lebanon were able to withdraw almost completely intact. It created, however, a huge Palestinian refugee crisis as the Israelis left Haddad to police the areas they had seized and the Palestinian population fled towards Beirut. The growth of Palestinian refugee camps around Beirut would provide sites of slaughter in the Israeli invasion of 1982. This time, the assault was on Beirut itself – the Paris of the eastern Mediterranean, capital city of a most uneasy but somewhat managed polity of Islamic and Christian mixtures, and major city of a land that, in the reputed days of King Solomon, willingly and generously provided beams of cedar to build the Israeli temple in Jerusalem.

The PLO put out a call for international brigades to come to its assistance and prepared to dig in for an urban war that would have destroyed the beautiful city. Clashes did begin, but a huge international diplomatic effort ensured that the Palestinian forces could leave brandishing their weapons and claiming at least a moral victory – they had not in fact been militarily defeated – but they had to find a new exile home in Tunis. The Israelis were happy, in that Tunis was at the other end of the Mediterranean and the PLO grip on the region would not be as strong. But the PLO withdrawal left the Palestinian refugee camps without protection, and Haddad's militia killed in cold blood the inhabitants of Sabra and Shatila; some estimates point to 3,500 fatalities; mostly Palestinians and a number of Lebanese Shi'a Muslims. The Shi'a element would return to haunt the Israelis.

So that the final Israeli assault on Lebanon was precisely to root out the Shi'a militia and political group, Hezbollah – that in fact held many seats in the Lebanese Parliament, and so were a *bona fide* force in Lebanese politics, as well as being a disruptive one through its militia and through its alliances with Syria and Iran – the latter being the Shi'a stronghold of the world. But the Hezbollah forces stood and fought the Israelis, firstly bunkered down and dug underground as the tank columns passed, then bursting into the open to attack from within the Israeli formations. The Israelis had not expected the toughness of the resistance, and had underestimated the Iranian training of Hezbollah. By this time, Israeli military doctrine was no longer as daring as during the 1967 war, and in any case the terrain of Lebanon did not lend itself to that kind of multi-arrow-head attack. The doctrine was almost conventional, and the Hezbollah militia had no trouble reading it. But, as the Israelis pulled back, they realised the enemy of the future would be Iran; and the new Iranian President Ahmedinejad, elected in 2005, was not averse to sabre-rattling and certainly not shy to alert the world to an Iranian nuclear development programme.

In 2006 as well, in the Palestinian legislative elections, Fatah, the dominant political party of the PLO, having failed to deliver anything like a real independence because of the success of Israeli policies – and having grown immensely corrupt as well as inefficient – were defeated by Hamas who took 74 of the 132 seats. And Hamas was supported by Syria and Iran. But how had Fatah and the PLO returned from its exile in Tunis to become the government of what was called the Palestinian Authority? We turn now from wars to the almost as vexed diplomacy deployed upon the region. This involved the US at Presidential level – but it was the Egyptian President Sadat who, with immense daring, first sought a sudden irreversible breakthrough.

A meditation: the pharaoh goes to David's city

In the divisive scriptures and legends of the region, the Jewish people have in fact an intimate relationship with the Lebanese, the Iranians and the Egyptians – the Lebanese, as mentioned above, because of King Hiram's

despatching the cedars of Lebanon to Solomon to build the temple; the Iranians, or Persians as they then were, for the release of the Jewish people from Babylonian captivity with permission to rebuild that temple; and the Egyptians who enslaved them but, before then, had appointed Joseph, under the Pharaoh, as prime minister of Egypt. Many years later came David, who established the seat of the fledging kingdom of Israel, as it emerged from a mere federation of tribes, in Jerusalem.

In 1977, four years after the Egyptian recapture of Sinai, President Sadat went to Jerusalem. The Israelis had only a few days' notice that he wanted to come and were in consternation at this wholly unexpected and unpredicted development. They realised they had to agree or be seen as the side that had refused an opportunity for peace. Sadat had shared his decision with a close group of advisers, not all of whom agreed with the initiative but, insofar as the President seemed determined to go ahead, this was a 'rational actor' moment – although, like Kaunda's with de Klerk in Southern Africa, impulsive and trusting on intuition. The difference was that the Egyptians had no end of briefing materials on Israel and its leadership. Sadat took on board this material, but still seemed to trust intuitively to a moral breakthrough. Having said that, he, having waged war on Israel, would have known from previous briefings the perils and balances of gains and losses he was now about to encounter – so that the organisational processes and politics of the past would not have been fully absent. However, he certainly did not act according to a repertoire. His action was entirely new, original and daring.

In the wake of his visit, his amazing and morally-pitched rhetoric to the Israeli Knesset, and the international press coverage it received – almost all glowing and, indeed, hopeful – it seemed both that some sort of peace might be possible, and that the Egyptians had seized the moral high ground.

For Sadat, having both claimed a military triumph (although, as noted above, had the 1973 conflict continued, that might not have been the case) and a diplomatic/moral one, he would have felt in a secure position. President Jimmy Carter hosted both Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Begin at Camp David in 1978, and the famous 'walk in the woods', with Carter conducting personalised diplomacy while wearing a jumper, did indeed seem to establish a formal peace between Egypt and Israel. This was less three 'rational actors' working together in a spontaneous fashion and in an informalised situation. Each would have been very carefully briefed and rehearsed – again not in any repertoire sense, since peace had not been achieved between them before, but in the cut and thrust of concessions and conditions. The fact that, in the end, it was reasonably straight-forward did not mean there had been no such preparations.

And there was one looming caveat: this was a peace between Egypt and Israel. The Palestinians had not been invited to Camp David. Sadat did not speak for them. He did not speak for the Arab world. He spoke for Egypt. And he certainly did not speak for what was then regarded as an unimportant fringe player in the Palestinian equation, Iran. The Iranian Revolution took place in 1979, and suddenly what seemed like a militant, unpredictable, to some irrational, Shi'a presence burst upon the scene with international as well as Middle Eastern consequences. The US was certainly dismayed and encouraged Saddam Hussein's Iraq to wage war against Iran from 1980-4, with huge financing channelled through Saudi Arabia. Saddam did not win this war but, suddenly, he was more powerful too.

The Palestinians, chagrined over their exclusion from Camp David, mindful that the PLO leadership had been marginalised within Palestine by exile in distant Tunis, and seeing no diplomatic or negotiating progress on the ground, rose up in the first *Intifada* of 1987-91. And 1991 was also the year, when emboldened by US support in his war with Iran, Saddam made the fateful mistake of invading Kuwait and setting into train the First Gulf War. The region was in flames. Even Syria sent troops to fight alongside the US and its coalition. Everyone forgot about the Palestinians. The 'new world order' that emerged, seemingly as a consolidation of the fall of communism in 1989, had no place for a people seemingly condemned to live on the fringes of diplomacy and nationhood.

A further meditation: Oslo, for better or worse

We have seen how, in 1984 in Lusaka, Track II diplomacy was utilised by Track I actors to test possible avenues for future Track I or official, governmental negotiations. In starkest terms, Track I refers to official state or recognised

international agency diplomacy; and Track II are unofficial actors. It is rare for a Track II initiative to be able to claim a major diplomatic success without first reference to a future tie-in with Track I. An exception may be in the process that led to the Oslo Accords, beginning in 1993 – when a group of academics pondered a peace plan that would include the Palestinians and satisfy both them and the Israelis. They entered where 'angels' such as Sadat and Carter had feared to tread. Amazingly, their outline plan was bold but realistic enough to garner almost immediate Track I admiration and adoption – or perhaps 'adaptation' might be the better term as Oslo 2 began to put detailing into place, and these talks in the second stage of the Oslo process were commanded by Track I negotiators, although this had not been envisaged or pre-arranged in the first instance.

It was Oslo 2 that in 1995 set into place a stage-by-stage plan for Palestinian statehood – a Palestinian Administrative Authority being established at the first stage. Yasser Arafat and the PLO, marginalised in Tunis, were desperate to be integrated into the process, and to become the Administrative Authority. But they took to the talks a skeleton delegation, in which only one person was a lawyer who spoke English and who could understand the detailing of the final Accords. Even so, the problem of the final Accords was not so much in their wording – although a system of guarantees might certainly have helped – but their later implementation. The most controversial and difficult part of the Accords was the division of the land into Categories A, B, and C. Category C land was controlled by the Israelis, but would eventually become Category B. Category B land was jointly controlled by the Israelis and Palestinians, but would eventually become Category A. Category A land, the minority portion around the major Palestinian cities, would be from the outset under Palestinian Authority control. A fully-fledged Palestinian state would emerge as the land passed fully into Palestinian hands. But it never really happened. Israeli settlements began to dominate huge portions of Category C and large parts of Category B land. Category A land was not immune to Israeli interventions. Israel controlled the majority of the water resources, without which land could not be fully farmed. And Israel closed down the only Palestinian airport, so that access to 'Palestine' involved first entry and scrutiny in Israel; or entry via Jordan, with its own troubled Palestinian history. And Gaza was a geographically separate enclave – although Prime Minister Sharon did withdraw Israeli settlements from Gaza. They have, however, proliferated on the West Bank.

The slow motion to non-existent progress of land transfer, and the countermanding growth of settlements led the new Palestinian Authority into a huge credibility deficit with its own people. Arafat himself compounded the problems by not making the transition from guerrilla leader to a prime ministerial figure. Palestinian public administration was chaotic and awful, and became corrupt and patron-driven. But the major issue was land. It seemed the Oslo Accords were doomed in their promise. And the Israelis had worked out that it was better to have the PLO not in distant Tunis, but pleading with them close to hand in a dependent relationship. President Clinton convened Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Barak at Camp David in 2000, in a doomed effort to salvage the Oslo Accords – but to no real effect. The second *Intifada* broke out in 2000 and went on to 2005. Unlike the first *Intifada*, which had a genuine spontaneity, the second was urged on by the PLO as its violent symbol of resistance to Israeli bad faith. It did not change Israeli policy and, in 2005, President Ahmedinejad took office in Iran, with both his nuclear development policy and his clear antipathy towards Israeli Zionism. In 2006, with support from Iran, Hamas won a huge victory in the Palestinian elections, and civil war broke out in Palestine between Hamas and a PLO reluctant to surrender power – and supported by a US who was far from rigorous in its demands for an observation of democratic outcomes. Hamas was driven from the West Bank, but retained control of Gaza. This was followed by three wars between Gaza and Israel.

Before we look at the return to war, it might be worthwhile to make two observations: the first is a simple one, and that is the difficulty Track II has in laying conditions or demanding guarantees for the Track I take up of its accomplishments; once Track I takes up, or takes over, the negotiating process, it is up to official representatives within an official process to negotiate professionally and properly. This leads to the second observation: the PLO did not negotiate well in Oslo 2. It had neither experience nor expertise in sufficient amounts for what became a seemingly amazing breakthrough that was, all the same, fraught with risks. A gigantic leap of faith would have been required under any circumstances, but an under-negotiated leap was totally perilous. Arafat and his delegation had no history of research, no history or culture of organisational processes and the scrutiny that comes from what competitive agencies and ministries apply to one another. Arafat as 'rational actor' was perhaps driven by a lifelong moral and national quest, but it seems he was also driven by desperation – and that is the least desirable element in

any species of 'rationality'.

Gaza, Egypt and Israel

Greatly complicating the picture was recent history: the attacks of 9/11 occurred in 2001. Gulf War II broke out in 2003, as the Western armies marched into Iraq. As a result of the second *Intifada*, a 'quartet' involving the US, the UN, the EU and Russia was established in 2002; it was intended to act as some kind of diplomatic 'shotgun' in the Israeli/Palestinian situation – but it was missing key actors. Iran might beneficially have been one. And Egypt, who under Sadat had become an icon of peace with Israel, now had a joint interest with Israel in the containment of Hamas in Gaza. The Egyptian concern with Hamas was the relationship between Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, banned in Egypt, and the only significantly organised opposition to the descendants of Nasser and Sadat who, as military men wearing suits, ruled the country with a growing lack of imagination and a growing sense of self-interest. It is no accident that the Arab Spring had its greatest popular manifestation on the streets and squares of Cairo. But it meant, for Gaza, an imprisonment with Israeli checkpoints on one side, and Egyptian checkpoints on the other, and an Israeli maritime blockade at sea. Militant Gazans took to firing homemade rockets at Israel. They, for the most part, caused little damage – but did invite massive Israeli retaliation. The assaults of 2008-9, 2012, and 2014 caused increasing amounts of damage; that of 2014 left a trail of huge destruction and ruination of a city that has become perhaps the largest concentration camp or, speaking less dramatically, largest ghetto – in the old European sense of Jewish ghettos – on earth. No solution, or even settlement of the problems in this part of the world will ever become possible unless not only Israel and Palestine conclude successful negotiations, but Palestinian factions achieve successful negotiations between themselves, and Israel and Egypt both agree a joint outcome; and Iran is satisfied that its ally, Hamas, is justly served. As for being justly or fairly served, there has been no election in Palestine since 2006. And, even if all these participating parties find themselves amenable to one another, there is still of course the vexed question of land. Even if all the settlements were withdrawn, or even if Palestine agreed to all the settlements remaining with, for instance, autonomous municipal rights, where exactly would Israel end and Palestine start? What would the borders be?

Borders as an expanding phenomenon

Unlike almost every other conflict, where borders have been inscribed in earlier agreements or treaties, those between Israel and Palestine have changed dramatically over the years – and each change has signalled a shrinkage of Palestine.

The original borders, those under the UN Mandate that were meant to demarcate the territorial limits of Israel, were precisely the borders at independence in 1948. However, the defeat of the invading Arab armies in 1949 meant a huge increase in the size of Israel as military forces occupied land seized from the defeated neighbours. The new borders were in fact recognised internationally as the 'Green Lines'. However, the war of 1967 meant the forward pushing of borders yet again and, although not all of these were sustained (Egypt retook the Sinai in 1973; the West Bank of Jordan became the Palestinian 'future state', albeit with a large number of Jewish settlements and Israeli control of much land; but Israel annexed the Golan from Syria), it meant an increase in size even so. The Geneva Accord lines of 2003 tried to recognise *fait accompli* and these represent the furthest extent of formal international acceptance of an enlarged Israel – but do not include the settlements and do not recognise the further intrusion into Palestinian territory of the Israeli wall. It would seem that, even should the settlements issue be resolved, the wall would represent the only acceptable border for the Israeli state. Palestine would become a small emirate or, if the settlements remain as formal extensions of Israel, a necklace of separated 'free Palestinian cities' with very little agricultural hinterland or assured contiguity. In the light of the original Balfour Declaration, which proposed (certainly by comparison with the reality today) a sort of equitable partition, we would have very little we could call a Palestinian state. The problems for future diplomacy seem intractable.

About the author:

Stephen Chan OBE was Foundation Dean of Law and Social Sciences at SOAS University of London, where he remains as Professor of World Politics. He has occupied many named chairs around the world, most recently the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Chair of Academic Excellence at Bir Zeit University in 2015, and the George Soros Chair of Public Policy at the Central European University in 2016. He was the 2010 International Studies Association Eminent Scholar in Global Development. As an international civil servant he helped pioneer modern electoral observation in Zimbabwe in 1980, worked in many post-conflict zones – where 'post' was a largely fictional if politic appellation – and continues to be seconded to many diplomatic initiatives around the world today. He is the author of *Meditations on Diplomacy: Comparative Cases in Diplomatic Practice and Foreign Policy* (2017).