

Interview – Jeremy Pressman

Written by E-International Relations

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Dr Jeremy Pressman is an Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of the program in Middle East Studies at the University of Connecticut. His third and most recent book is *The sword is not enough: Arabs, Israelis, and the limits of military force* (Manchester University Press, 2020). He has written journal articles about many topics including the Camp David summit of 2000, the second intifada, the intersection of stone throwing and (non)violence, and annual Israeli and Palestinian speeches at the United Nations. Pressman also co-directs the Crowd Counting Consortium and has co-authored pieces in the Washington Post and elsewhere on the geographic scope and peaceful nature of the 2020 antiracism protests, the size of the 2017 Women's March, and other aspects of protests in the United States. He was a Fulbright Fellow at the Norwegian Nobel Institute and was awarded a UConn Provost's Award for Excellence in Community Engaged Scholarship (2019).

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

What is the future of Israel-Palestine? What is the best way to get to that endpoint? An incredible amount is at stake for the people, the Palestinians and the Israelis. The situation is not symmetrical. Most Israeli Jews and some Palestinians are able to live somewhat normal lives in terms of their social life, careers, and political rights (caveat: The previous sentence is a generalization that deserves a lot more nuance in a longer explication). But that is not the case for millions of Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip who live under repressive military control, not to mention some Palestinian refugees involuntarily living abroad, such as in Lebanon.

For two decades, the consensus solution has been a two-state solution. The European Union, the League of Arab States, Norway, Russia, the United Nations, the United States, and others have all endorsed the idea. Starting in 2000 at the Camp David Summit, the parties to the conflict tried to reach two states, but they have failed. If not two states, what? Israeli annexation of everything between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea and the perpetual denial of Palestinian rights? The Trump plan from January 2020 is called a two-state solution but is much closer to the continued Israeli domination of Palestinian life. Or, one single state in that same geographic spot with equal rights for *everyone*? Some kind of confederal solution that may or may not work? It remains to be seen; the debate is in flux.

In my own work, I am also focused on a question with which the historical side of the field is grappling. Was the peace process — the US-led negotiations that have taken various forms since the 1970s — ever designed to actually resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, including Israel-Palestine, in a mutually-agreeable fashion? Or was the process always so tilted toward Israel, Washington's close ally, that a mutually-agreeable solution was structurally impossible? Those interested in these questions might start with William B. Quandt's classic book, *Peace Process*, but there is much more to read and digest.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I am repeatedly struck by a basic question: Does how we talk about the world affect how the world is? Is there a material reality beyond our control, or do our perceptions and conceptual frames shape and re-shape the world? I probably started out much more as a materialist but heard constructivist and other academic arguments that

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challenged my thinking. When I teach Introduction to International Relations, it is one of the core questions I want students to consider and come away thinking about.

In my work on Israel-Palestine, for example, I think about the question in terms of the proposed two-state solution that would stand up a State of Palestine alongside the State of Israel. Some analysts say that a two-state solution is dead. Is it dead because of the physical construction of the huge Israeli settlement project? Or is it dead when we say it, and all (or mostly all) people agree it is no longer a viable option?

Donald Trump puts another twist on the question of how our rhetoric affects our reality, because I tended to think of the question as a result of academic debates. But here is a right-wing politician, not a scholar, who seeks to impose his made-up understanding of reality on the country and the world. He and his spokespeople rarely seem constrained by the facts or science or even what they themselves have said previously. He makes up stories and people, going back to his days of calling journalists, but pretending to be someone else other than Donald Trump. The Trump administration's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was an epic failure, yet he said he did "a phenomenal job." He has convinced tens of millions of people to share his perspective, seemingly strong evidence of how an influential leader talks about the world does shape how a lot of people see that world.

You are the co-director of the Crowd Counting Consortium (CCC), which collects data on political crowds in the United States, such as protests and strikes. Before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, what trends were you seeing?

We have been collecting data since January 2017. This has been a period of tremendous social mobilization in the United States. Think of all the massive protests of the last almost four years. The 2017 Women's March, the March for Science, the 2018 Women's March, the March for Our Lives, the National School Walkout, and climate strikes. We could look at this as a reaction to the Trump administration and, at least in 2017–2018, right-wing control of the three branches of the US government (until the US House flipped to Democratic control in the 2018 midterm election). But we should think about longer-term trends too, such as massive economic inequality, denigration of science, voter suppression, and the flood of guns in US society. Sometimes people are skeptical that protests matter. But evidence suggests these massive protest waves usually have an impact on political outcomes like voting in future elections. For example, Larrebourg and González's recent working paper makes that argument with regard to the Women's March and the 2018 election.

I have also been amazed at the myriad of things that cause people to protest. Yes, some of those issues have to do with national politics. But other people and groups are protesting a range of local issues as well, such as demanding more school homework, saving trees rather than building pickleball courts, or even expressing displeasure with their professional sports team.

How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted protests in the US?

Austin Choi-Fitzpatrick and I have a pre-print (early draft) looking at how the subject matter and, in some cases, tactics of demonstrations during the April–May 2020 lockdown shifted in the United States. Most protests were either about better public health measures and getting more PPE [personal protective equipment] or about pressing for easing health regulations and reopening many more businesses quickly. Sadly, the issue usually was framed as protecting public health or reopening the economy, rather than what I think is the reality, better public health success as the fastest pathway toward reopening the economy. We need both, not one or the other. On the tactical level, pro-public health protestors practiced social distancing, held small protests, and sometimes turned to safer car caravans instead of people-in-the-street protests. This summer's Black Lives Matter and antiracism protests were stunning in their size and scope in spite of – or maybe because of – the pandemic

You recently published a new book titled *The sword is not enough: Arabs, Israelis, and the limits of military force* (2020). Why has the use of military force been counterproductive in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict?

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Let me emphasize two reasons. Since using military force often backfires, threatening and using it can make the situation more uncertain, unstable, and dangerous. Depending on exactly how it plays out, that may tend to push countries toward more confrontation rather than reconciliation. In the book, one such example was the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the rise of Hezbollah; Israel-Hezbollah tension and insecurity continues to this day.

Perhaps more importantly, a consistent commitment to force and disinterest in negotiations and mutual concessions do not create a receptive conceptual and political environment for introducing diplomatic off-ramps. Countries are very suspicious, thereby undermining or denigrating the prospect of negotiations. They fear diplomatic offers are a trick, a Trojan horse. Even the great example often used to show a bold Arab leader extending his hand in peace, Egypt's President Anwar Sadat, demonstrates this point. First, in 1977, some in the Israeli establishment initially were skeptical when he made an offer to come from Cairo to Jerusalem and speak before the Israeli parliament to jumpstart the diplomatic track. Second, even though Sadat's diplomatic move ultimately succeeded when Egypt and Israel signed a peace treaty in 1979, some Egyptians were so angry about Sadat's abandonment of the military route that they dramatically assassinated him in 1981.

Why do you believe “the sword” (i.e., military force) has been a more attractive option for all sides in the Arab-Israeli conflict than diplomacy?

Part of it is the institutions and patterns of thinking that have been built up over decades. Part of it, as I note in chapter two of the book, is that there are some historical examples that reinforce the value of threatening and using military force. Part of it is the way in which a realist world, a world of competition, does capture much of what the world looks like today, making it easier to convince people of the need to be forceful. Part of it is that in a cacophony of voices — Hamas and Fatah, multiple Israeli political parties, many Arab interlocutors — it can become hard to hear the conciliatory ones amidst all the noise, anger, and threats.

What needs to happen to make diplomacy a more attractive option for all parties involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict?

In chapter six, I consider the ways in which negotiations can become more prominent, and here are two examples. One path is leaders in strong political positions who want negotiations and demilitarization. Leaders who are willing to compromise. This first point does raise questions about the respective roles of bottom-up or grassroots change versus top-down, leader-led breakthroughs. A second possibility is mutual, cooperative steps that start small but create a cooperative escalatory spiral (e.g., thinking of tit for tat).

Recently, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and Bahrain signed the Abraham Accords at the White House. What are your initial thoughts or impressions? What are the strengths and limitations of the agreement?

In other posts, I've made two points about these normalization agreements. First, at LSE's International History blog, I argue that the agreements have not been especially historic in nature thus far in terms of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Rather, it was a modest diplomatic achievement. I do admit many other analysts see much bigger implications, including for religious dialogue in the region. Also, that they may be historic in terms of regional strategic machinations is a separate point, in my view. Second, in a different article at Political Violence @ a Glance, I question whether they actually open or reinforce any clear pathway toward genuine Israeli-Palestinian negotiations or peace. I do not see it.

I would add a third point quickly that is not about these agreements specifically. Most international agreements Trump officials have announced have been greatly exaggerated once the actual impact became clear, e.g., NAFTA 2.0, US-North Korea nuclear matters, and the trade agreement with China. President Trump came into office saying the Mideast deal would be Israeli-Palestinian. Instead, US-Palestinian relations have collapsed. They are not even speaking to each other. These recent normalization agreements could be the exception when compared with other “agreements,” but we have reason to cast a wary eye, for now, to see how the agreements unfold and whether other Arab states such as Saudi Arabia join in.

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What advice would you give to the winner of the upcoming US election on foreign policy in the Middle East?

That is the toughest question yet. I'll keep it simple. US policy in the Middle East is littered with failures and mistakes that have resulted in great human suffering. Figure out how to change that track record. If I'm thinking about the ideas in my book, *The sword is not enough*, a greater emphasis on negotiations and mutual concessions would be one major option, say not only with Iran but certainly also in Yemen, where the civil war has been totally brutal.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Understand why you believe what you believe or argue what you argue in a given piece, but be open to rethinking your concepts and your evidence. Do your best to be constructive when discussing your work or the work of others. Talk to a lot of different people; read widely. Value your family and social relationships. We often talk about the disappointments, say article rejections, but don't forget to celebrate the triumphs when they come. Take advice from older scholars with a grain of salt; the world is dynamic.