



America's many failed attempts at Mideast peace

The Boston Globe, January 2, 2007

THE RECENT Iraq Study Group report called for a new American effort to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. This, it claims, is the only way to eliminate the primary source of anti-Americanism in the Middle East and facilitate a solution for Iraq. The report's authors claim to be realists, but given the state of Israeli and Palestinian politics, how realistic are the chances such an initiative will succeed? The possibilities are exceedingly limited, as the history of American mediation attempts reveals.

American attempts at Arab-Israeli peacemaking began in 1947, when Harry S. Truman supported the United Nations plan to partition Palestine into separate Arab and Jewish states. But the Palestinian Arabs rejected that compromise, and Arab armies tried to destroy the Jewish nation. Later, when Israel repelled the invaders, American diplomat Ralph Bunche mediated an armistice -- an achievement for which he won the Nobel Prize. Yet the Arab League pledged to carry on the war, and Israel refused to repatriate Palestinian refugees. The Arab-Israeli conflict, as it came to be known, continued.

Next, Dwight Eisenhower mounted two secret initiatives, code-named Alpha and Gamma, in which Israel would trade desert territories for a non belligerency treaty with Egypt. Both combatants balked, and by 1956 were once again at war. President Kennedy also tried to foster reconciliation with a scheme for resettling Palestinians in the arid Jordan Valley.

Then came the 1967 Six-Day War, during which President Johnson crafted a framework for exchanging Israel's territories for security and peace. The concept was embodied in UN Resolution 242, but Israel was reluctant to relinquish land, and the Arab states refused to negotiate with Israel, much less grant it peace. Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger strove to uphold the resolution, but fruitlessly. Later, Ronald Reagan offered a plan for shared Jordanian-Palestinian rule of the West Bank. The first President Bush convened a peace conference in Madrid in 1991. Bill Clinton doggedly attempted to broker a Palestinian-Israeli accord. Special emissaries such as Dennis Ross and Philip Habib tirelessly crisscrossed the region. All these efforts failed, however, in the face of Israel's settlement policy and Arab terror and rejection of the Jewish state.

George W. Bush joined other members of the Quartet -- Russia, the European Union, and the UN -- in supporting a road map to Palestinian statehood and an end to the conflict. This, too, has floundered; the parties could not meet the map's minimal requirements. Nearly six decades of American mediation have registered only one lasting success: the 1979 treaty between Egypt and Israel. But that agreement was only made possible by the courage of Anwar Sadat, who became the first Arab leader to visit Israel, and Menachem Begin, who agreed to restore Sinai to Egypt. Yet even this breakthrough failed to bring about a comprehensive settlement. Israel refused to give up the West Bank and Gaza, Syria boycotted the talks, and PLO chairman Yasser Arafat urged Sadat's assassination.

Why, after so many futile efforts, have American policy makers persisted in searching for peace? US leaders tend to view the Middle East as an arena for demonstrating their diplomatic prowess and for affirming America's status as a world power. A deeper impetus may be the desire of Americans, many of whom are religiously observant, to bring tranquility to the Holy Land.

Yet solving the world's most intractable conflict requires Arab and Israeli leaders who are committed to peace and strong enough to fulfill that commitment. That prerequisite is missing today. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of Israel and President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority have both reiterated their willingness to renew negotiations and have recently agreed on confidence-building measures, but neither has the political clout to conclude an accord. Olmert's approval ratings are the

lowest in Israeli history. Abbas, facing a civil war with Hamas, is literally fighting for his life.

So any American initiative is almost certain to fail. Though peace would reinforce America's self-image and perhaps ease its predicament in Iraq, it is unrealistic to hang hopes for resolving that crisis on an elusive Arab-Israeli accord. American mediation can succeed, but only after the emergence of local leaders who, like Sadat and Begin, have both the will and the strength to make peace. Michael Oren, a senior fellow at the Shalem Center in Jerusalem, is the author of the forthcoming "Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, from 1776 to the Present."

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