

A separate peace in the Middle East

How it was achieved and what the 'Palestinian cause' now requires

By Clifford D. May

Before there was a Palestinian-Israeli conflict, there was an Arab-Israeli conflict. Last week, on the White House lawn, that older conflict was put to rest.

In normal times, we'd agree that the president deserves a Nobel Peace Prize, and that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict should be next up on Washington's diplomatic to-do list.

But these are not normal times. Prior to the ceremony, I received an email announcing: "Over 50 Organizations/Groups to protest the UAE and Bahrain Normalization with Israel During Deal Signing at the White House."

Would I and others exiting the White House grounds and emerging on the mean streets of Washington, D.C. be harassed or even attacked by members of the anti-peace wing of the peace movement? As it turned out, the protestors awaiting us were more Code Pink than Antifa, more annoying than threatening.

Many in the media have been reluctant to acknowledge the significance of what President Trump, assisted by Jared Kushner, his advisor and son-in-law, achieved. The ho-hum headline in *The Washington Post*: "Israel signs deal establishing formal ties with two Arab states at the White House."

What really happened: The United Arab Emirates and the Bahrainis normalized relations with Israel, accepting Israel as their neighbor, implicitly acknowledging that the Jewish people have a right to a nation state in part of their ancient homeland.

Neither would have taken this step without the tacit approval of Saudi Arabia. Other Arab nations could soon be exchanging ambassadors with Israel as well.

Most telling: The Palestinian Authority asked the 22-member Arab League to condemn the deal. The Arab League declined. This is the same Arab League that after the second Arab war against Israel, in 1967, issued the "three nos": "No peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with Israel."

Until now, the only Arab nations that had made peace with Israel were Egypt and Jordan, and only after losing three wars. That led them to conclude that another war against Israel would be disastrous, whereas peace would mean the return of the Sinai to Egypt, and essential security assistance for Jordan.

For decades, a herd of experts – diplomats, academics, journalists, politicians – insisted that a deal such as President Trump and Mr. Kushner facilitated was out of the question. In 2016, John Kerry, glasses perched haughtily on the tip of his nose, both index fingers jabbing the air for emphasis, pontificated to an elite audience:

"There will be no separate peace between Israel and the Arab world. I want to make that very clear to all of you. ... No. No, No and No. ... There will be no advance and separate peace with the Arab world without the Palestinian process and Palestinian peace. Everybody needs to understand that. That is a hard reality."

Actually, Mr. Kerry deserves credit for contributing to this outcome – albeit unintentionally. His negotiations with Javad Zarif, the shrewd foreign minister of the Islamic Republic, ended with the Obama administration sending billions of dollars to Iran's rulers,

funds that have helped them more effectively threaten Arab states that refuse to kowtow.

Secretary Kerry and President Obama also convinced Arab leaders that Washington can be fickle. Israel, by contrast, is the one nation with the motivation and the means to frustrate the Islamic Republic's imperialist ambitions.

Why couldn't the UAE and Bahrain have just continued to develop amicable relations with Israel discreetly? Why go formal and public, and why now?

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Because, the Israelis were planning, with the Trump administration's blessing, to extend sovereignty – call it annexation if you like – over a large swath of the West Bank. That would have been a serious setback for the "Palestinian cause" (more on that in a moment) and embarrassing for Israel's Arab friends. The Israelis had a chance to change facts on the ground. They needed a good reason not to. The Emiratis offered one.

Palestinian leaders ought to be grateful. They aren't, which only demonstrates that while times have changed, Palestinian leaders have not.

They continue to tell credulous audiences that the "Palestinian cause" is to establish a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. More sophisticated audiences understand the goal is for a Palestinian state to replace the Jewish state. That's what is meant by the chant: "Palestine will be free, from the river to the sea!"

Hamas, Hezbollah and Tehran vow to achieve that goal through terrorism and warfare. The Palestinian Authority prefers ambiguity, in particular the demand that Palestinian "refugees" be granted a "right of return" to Israel. As many as 800,000 Arabs fled during the Arab-Israeli war of 1948-9. Perhaps 30,000 are still alive. But the demand is for all those claiming to be their descendants – about 5

million – to "return."

Israeli Jews, a majority of whom are from families driven out of such formerly diverse cities as Baghdad, Cairo, and Damascus, know only too well what would happen were they to become a minority in Israel, ruled by people taught to despise them.

As Mr. Kushner looked at the Palestinian-Israeli conflict with fresh eyes, he undoubtedly came to realize that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, pushing 85, would never make peace. Mr. Abbas wants to be remembered as a lifelong leader of the resistance, like his predecessor, Yasser Arafat – not an Arab Zionist who, in his final days, shook hands with Benjamin Netanyahu on the White House lawn.

Could Mr. Abbas' successor decide to pursue peace and prosperity, accepting – if not embracing – Jews as neighbors? We don't know who will follow Mr. Abbas. Establishing the institutions necessary for a functioning state – including a reliable mechanism for succession – is one of many missions Mr. Abbas never regarded as essential to the Palestinian cause.

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