

A road map for diplomacy

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Over the last 70 years, more than half a dozen Middle East peace conferences have been planned or convened. Each brought together Arabs, Zionist/Israelis and a mediator. Sometimes the mediator shuttled between the parties; other times the conference was held before the public, other times in secluded settings..

Outcomes of each past conference have included one or more of the following: consensus to focus on a political horizon, narrowing of differences, public posturing, actual agreement signing, externally imposed issuance of a policy, total failure and a frequent desire by one side or another to curry favor with the great powers who convened the conference.

Habitually, conferences have not changed years of mutual skepticism and mistrust. However, by signing a document using verbal ambiguity, sides were able to agree to disagree.

Arguments can be offered about why and why not an international Middle East peace conference will be held before the end of the year. Convocation of a conference today differs enormously from previous ones - the players, potential agenda, immediate objectives, regional environment and international setting are obviously not the same. Nonetheless, if a conference is held, valuable lessons may be gleaned from the planning, successes, mistakes and missteps surrounding previous Middle East conferences.

AT THE 1939 London Round Table conference, Britain imposed its policy of truncating the Jewish national home and protecting the Arab population, thereby staying in Palestine for another decade. In 1946-1947, Zionists shunned participation at a British-sponsored conference because the agenda focused on implementing either provincial autonomy or a unitary state, not the establishment of a Jewish state. At Lausanne in 1949, the Palestinian refugee issue, status of Jerusalem and prospects of an economic union dominated discussions, but no substantive conclusions were reached.

At Geneva in 1973, public posturing gave way to a prior Israeli-Egyptian-American understanding that a military disengagement agreement would be signed. At Camp David in 1978, agreements reached generally outlined future Egyptian-Israeli relations and possible implementation of Palestinian autonomy. Though negotiated in secret in 1987 between Jordan and Israel, a proposed international conference did not materialize.

At Madrid in 1991, bilateral and multilateral talks emerged, again after public posturing. Rather than reaching a specific agreement, Madrid realigned the political environment because newly

participating Arab states were supportive rather than steadfast in opposition to any accommodation with Israel. At Camp David in 2000, discussion of final status issues took place, but no agreements were signed. On the contrary, in the months that followed, severe violence broke out, for the first time after an Arab-Israeli summit conference.

COMMON TO the three most successful conferences - Geneva in 1973, Camp David in 1978 and Madrid in 1991: They were not ends in and of themselves, but instead led to substantive agreements and additional discussions. Two conferences that ambitiously aimed at comprehensive solutions ended up in bilateral agreements.

In 1977, during the first nine months of Jimmy Carter's presidency, detailed and unwanted US planning for a Middle East conference caused Egyptian president Anwar Sadat to skirt the US and talk directly to the Israelis. Whereas bilateral and multilateral talks emerged from the 1991 Madrid Conference, no one expected that Israel and the PLO would negotiate secretly and, within two years, officially recognize each other, signing an agreement about Palestinian self-rule.

THE FIRST and most important lesson is that a successful conference is a means to an end, not an end itself. A conference is an intermediate diplomatic point that leads to other future rounds of negotiations, be they through future summitry, bilateral and/or multilateral meetings or continued dialogue between the parties, preferably with a relentless mediator or a team headed by such a mediator.

Today, with three key political leaders (George W. Bush, Mahmoud Abbas, Ehud Olmert) either termed out or precariously holding on to office, a diplomatic lifeline to sustain the negotiations beyond the conference must be operationally constructed. This could be joined by the parties in advance of the conference and maintained by outside interests like the Quartet, the US and with essential Arab state support.

After the 1973 Geneva Conference and Camp David in 1978, American mediation assured diplomatic movement toward additional agreements. After the 1991 Madrid Conference, bilateral and multilateral talks assured continuity.

In two cases, political leaders simply disliked being at the meetings, but went in part to please an American president. In 1991, prime minister Yitzhak Shamir dreaded going to the conference; he merely wanted to "get the Madrid Conference over and done with." And Yasser Arafat found nothing redemptive in participating in the Camp David 2000 conference with Bill Clinton and Ehud Barak.

SECOND, detailed pre-negotiations are critical. Going into the December 1973 Geneva Conference, US secretary of state Henry Kissinger knew that he would have a military disengagement agreement coming out of the conference; it became a conduit to additional disengagement agreements signed between Israel and Syria in May 1974 and Egypt and Israel again in September 1975.

Prior to convening the 1973 conference, Kissinger knew that its intention was not to engage in any substantive negotiations, but rather to provide international cover for Sadat as he prepared to sign a separate agreement with Israel, and to bring the USSR in without giving it a substantive mediation role.

Details of the January 1974 disengagement agreement and its the maps "appeared" in the briefcase of the State Department officials as they negotiated the detail of the agreement. This first Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreement itself was basically pre-negotiated during the previous two months between Egyptian Gen. Muhammad Gamasy and Israeli General Aharon Yariv at the post-1973 war "Kilometer 101" talks.

IF THE 1978 and 2000 Arab-Israeli Camp David summits are considered conferences, the success of the former was due to detailed and prolonged pre-negotiations, American diplomatic shuttle missions and a foreign ministers' summit meeting in Leeds Castle, London, seven weeks before Carter, Sadat and prime minister Menachem Begin met. According to Hal Saunders, the American assistant secretary of state at the time, "the first draft of the Camp David Accords was written at the London Churchill Hotel the night the American delegates returned from Leeds" and presented to Carter weeks in advance of Camp David 1978.

In addition to pre-negotiations, which might take the form of an agreement on a declaration of principles, pre-conference activity this time should include reduction of public incitement, confidence building measures and tension reducing initiatives.

The third lesson is an obvious corollary of the second: Do not go to a conference without proper preparation. On the other side of reality, when Arafat, Barak and Clinton met at Camp David in July 2000, there were virtually no pre-negotiations where either substantive issues were discussed or the agenda narrowed to cover negotiable items.

After years of knowing about the difficult issues, the Palestinian and Israeli leaderships did not discuss options for sharing Jerusalem, or the matter of Palestinian refugees. The Camp David 2000 summit failed for a variety of reasons, including a failure to engage in substantive and realistic pre-negotiations.

AND FOURTH, keep your eye on the prize. In preparation for each conference, stumbling blocks have reappeared. The question of who represents the Palestinians or whether they should attend has bedeviled most conferences. While focusing on Palestinian-Israeli issues in pre-conference days, Israelis and Syrians throw furtive glances at one another, like one-time suitors who keep postponing a climax. Each fancies diplomatic foreplay.

The Syrians do it often to assert their nation's centrality or to delay a conference's unfolding; the Israelis do it because they are strategically entranced by Damascus and its neighborhood influence. One may expect that before this conference unfolds, noises about "doing" Syria first will inevitably arise.

Before invitations to attend are issued, each side will want certain guarantees or understandings from whomever convenes the conference. How the conference is structured - public

presentations, multilateral talks, bilateral talks, convened under certain UN Resolutions - and even the shape of the table all matters. These procedures often drown out the substance, but only temporarily. Politicians, editorial writers and analysts will do their best to tell you why a conference has no worth, why it will be a bust, and that it is only being held to save, prolong or enhance a political career.

Finally, we have learned recently that elections and constitutions do not make democracy. Likewise, peace conferences do not make peace. Only leaders with vision, political will and the courage to compromise can do both.

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