

ANALYSIS

Earlier conferences failed to settle differences

By Kenneth W. Stein

The Middle East peace conference in Madrid is not the first time Arabs and Israelis (or Jews) have tried to reconcile their differences through negotiations. Nor is this the first time in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict that a conference format was chosen as the mechanism to discuss outstanding issues.

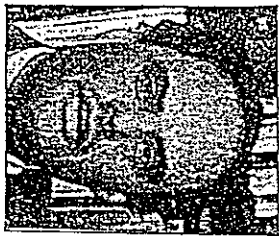
However, the Madrid conference and the planned subsequent bilateral discussions between Israel and her Arab neighbors possess unique historical significance because core political issues will ultimately be on the negotiating agenda.

There are common threads to Middle East conferences. Since 1948 they have been convened on the basis of U.N. resolutions, though Arabs and Israelis have given differing interpretations to the meaning of those resolutions. Some unofficial talks and private discussions took place between Arabs and Israelis. One person always has emerged as the key mediator or choreographer. There was either a controversy about who would represent the Palestinians or Palestinians were not represented at all. And, at no previous conference have negotiations resulted in solutions to issues pertaining to Palestinian rights, the nature of peace or Israel's eastern border.

War, violence preceded diplomacy

Historically, Arab-Israeli conference diplomacy has occurred after a war or after a prolonged period of communal violence between Israel and her Arab neighbors.

The February 1939 London conference took place after three years of violence and disturbances in Palestine between Arabs and Zionists, the April 1949 Lausanne conference was held in the wake of Israel's independence war of 1948-49, and the December 1973 Geneva conference convened after the October



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1973 war. Conferences resulted in either prolonging a political status quo, as in the years after the 1939 conference, or in separating military forces and exchanging prisoners of war, as occurred after the 1948 and 1973 wars.

In November 1938, Great Britain called for a conference of Jews and Arabs to discuss the nature of Palestine's future under the British Mandate. But Britain's purpose was not to craft a solution for Palestine's political future that would provide for either Jewish or Arab self-rule; Britain convened the conference as a clever cover to safeguard good will for the British throughout the Arab world.

The London conference met for six weeks, with opening remarks by Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. Discussions were held separately between British officials and the respective Jewish and Arab delegations. Egypt played a conciliatory and intermediary role much like it is doing today in Madrid.

Little negotiation took place

Then, as now, the Palestinians wanted great power to pressure the Jewish community into halting Jewish immigration and land settlement; then as now there was discussion of a 10-year transitional period until a unitary state would be established in Palestine. Since the British knew what conclusion they wanted — neither Arab majority self-rule nor contin-

ued growth of the Jewish national home — there was very little negotiation at the London conference, rather more an airing of opinion. As a result of this conference, Britain reaffirmed her presence in Palestine until she relinquished it to the United Nations in February 1947.

The Lausanne conference of 1949 was convened by the United Nations with the belief that a comprehensive settlement for a whole set of sensitive issues could be resolved quickly. However, without sufficient pre-negotiations to find common ground on complex issues such as Palestinian repatriation, Jerusalem's future status and the nature of peace and borders, no negotiating progress was made.

Though Egypt and Jordan were interested in trying to reach a political understanding with Israel, the United Nations made the mistake of grouping all the Arab states into one viewpoint, forcing the Arab world into uncompromising positions. One of the reasons that Israel has insisted on direct and separate bilateral talks is to avoid a repetition of this procedural mistake made at Lausanne.

Unlike the present Madrid conference, where there is an accepted negotiating framework, U.N. Security Council Resolution 242, the terms of reference at Lausanne were changed as the negotiations progressed. Negotiations were pursued via a process that can best be described as "ready, shoot, aim."

Convened after the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war, the two-day Geneva conference failed to deal with broad political issues. Then, none of the conflicting parties or the great powers was ripe for political discussions. The priority concern focused on terminating hostilities, separating forces and exchanging war prisoners.

Even though the invitations to Geneva, sent by the U.N. secretary general to Arab

states and Israel, called "for the beginning of negotiations ... for establishing a just and permanent peace in the Middle East," Washington's attention was focused primarily on the Egyptian-Israeli front.

Direct talks are on the agenda

The Madrid conference is precedent-setting. Not only are Arab states willing to meet with Israel in a conference format, they now are willing to use the conference's ceremonial beginning as an opening to engage in direct bilateral talks with Israel.

Unlike all previous efforts at Arab-Israeli conference diplomacy, this meeting is not taking place in the aftermath of a prolonged period of communal violence or state-to-state conflict between Israel and her Arab neighbors. Rather, it comes after the longest period of pre-negotiations. Political, not military, issues are main items on the negotiating agenda.

Lessons from previous attempts at Arab-Israeli conference diplomacy remind us of the importance of the United States and not necessarily the United Nations's role. Conference diplomacy usually results in some bilateral agreement or accord, with each negotiating side seeking to protect its own sovereign interest under the umbrella of a conference format.

The key difficulty for American nurturing of the bilateral talks will be to maintain some balance in the respective pace of each one. At Lausanne in 1949, when multilateral issues such as regional development were addressed, the diplomatic effort quickly aborted because of inadequate parallel progress on bilateral issues.

But the major difference between this conference and all previous conferences may be that the respective sides are looking for an excuse to make an accommodation, rather than an excuse to avoid one.