

The US And The Arab Israeli Conflict: A Palestinian Perspective

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Abstract

With the end of the Gulf War and its aftermath, it became clear that the American administration would do something substantial for the interest of peace in the Middle East , in order to preserve its credibility after the split caused by the Arab parties that opposed the American position regarding the Gulf crisis.

After decades of American diplomatic efforts, the administration accelerated its moves to bring all parties of the Middle East conflict to sit at one table. The United States exerted big efforts in arranging the Madrid conference by finding means to insure participation by all parties or by mobilizing support from concerned international powers, particularly Russia and the European Community.

The United States has succeeded with this method to achieve four objectives altogether:

Neutralizing the Arab sides that opposed the American position against Iraq.

Giving the United States the chance to continue the punitive sanctions against Iraq including the prolonged blockade without Arab public or official reaction.

Confirming its political power and international hegemony as the only super power in the world.

Finding the possibility of realizing some detente in the Arab Israeli relations and achieving an interim agreement or peace treaties between Israel and the Arab parties.

The United States has completely achieved the first three objectives, but the fourth one, which was the prerequisite for the other three, has been partly achieved with the risk of not being achieved at all.

In order to secure some relaxation which may facilitate the achievement of the objectives of the peace process, the United States has to play a big role beyond the diplomatic field and

the role of the neutral mediator. Without the full American partnership that allows to define the minimum conditions, the possibility of achieving peace will be doubtful.

A peace treaty between Israel and Syria and Lebanon may contain a part of the contact line between the adversaries. But the peace treaty with the Palestinians will remain the core of the peace process in the Middle East. This requires a decisive American role in this direction, especially when the United States has become an accepted partner by both sides, the Palestinians and Israelis.

I. Implications of the Gulf war

Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991, the Arab world was divided into three main spheres with differing perspectives.

Those who opposed the Iraqi invasion, included the countries of the Gulf Cooperation: Saudi Arabia, Oman, United Arab Emirates Qatar and Bahrain, in addition to Egypt and Syria, and to a lesser extent Morocco and Lebanon. Saudi Arabia and the other countries of the Gulf Cooperation believed themselves to be in direct danger as they were considered potential targets for Iraq following a successful invasion of Kuwait. The positions of these countries therefore derived essentially from a perspective of self-defense, particularly given that Kuwait is also one of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Those which demonstrated a greater empathy for the Iraqi invasion included Jordan, Yemen, Sudan and the PLO. However, these countries did not explicitly support the invasion. Their positions, whether in official meetings at the Arab summit level, at the foreign ministers level, or through their internal positions and demonstrations of popular support, leaned towards establishing a peaceful solution to the situation. This was interpreted in most circles as a readiness to accept the outcome of the invasion.

A third sphere included marginal Arab countries such as Mauritania and Somalia, which had their own internal issues that did not enable them to express any clear views. Libya's position was ambiguous.

These positions remained unchanged till the last day of the fighting and until a cease-fire agreement was reached. The cease-fire showed the scale of defeat and destruction inflicted on Iraq. The Arab parties that had not objected to the Iraqi invasion felt that their policies had been exposed as inept and they were in an indefensible position. It was inevitable therefore to see a split in the relations between the Arab countries. This split was not limited to parties for or against the invasion, as the dispute took a more serious dimension of opposition to

colonialist forces trying to destroy an Arab state. It was clear that this split would take a long time to be resolved and that specific remedial actions were required.

Gradually, one of two options was necessary:

1. To reduce the impact that was caused by the participation of Arab countries in attacking Iraq, either through blaming the Iraqi regime, through the call to save the Iraqi people, or through describing Arab participation in the battles as symbolic and that the defeat of Iraq was inevitable regardless of the participation of the Arab countries.

2. To reduce the effects of non-opposition to the Iraqi invasion by explaining that these parties did not support the invasion, but called for solving the issue within an Arab internal context and without resorting to the use of force. This also entailed getting those countries to reaffirm their recognition of the sovereignty of Kuwait.

Over time, these positions helped in reducing the gap between the two sections. For countries such as Jordan, Sudan and Yemen on one side and countries such as Egypt, Syria and Morocco on the other, this did not take long, whilst the gap remained very wide between the first group and the Gulf Cooperation countries. The positions of the Gulf Cooperation varied in terms of bridging the gap with those countries. Saudi Arabia adopted a hard line position on the process; Kuwait showed no intention of participating. A breakthrough was made ten years later and only after the death of King Hussein of Jordan. Saudi Arabia followed the path of the Gulf Cooperation and extended limited relationships with Jordan, Yemen and the PLO. Ten years on, we can now say that there is a semi-unified Arab position towards the Gulf crisis, which consist of the following:

A- Unreserved recognition of the state of Kuwait.

B- Major limitations in relationships with the Iraqi regime.

C- Attempts by the majority of the Arab countries to alleviate the suffering of the Iraqi people.

In relation to the USA, this situation is considered ideal, as the Iraqi regime has become isolated.

In face of the defeat, and the realization by the other Arab countries opposed to the invasion of Iraq of the real balance of powers and the results of the war, any opposition to the aftermath of war was not expressed explicitly or implicitly. On the contrary, Jordan, as a country neighboring with Iraq, has no choice but to abide by the UN Security Council resolutions to boycott Iraq and to join the embargo against it. Jordan did not maintain any ties with Iraq except those allowed by pertinent UN resolutions. Therefore, the isolation imposed

on Iraq allowed the US, which was the creator the international alliance against Iraq, to adopt stringent conditions when implementing the articles of international resolutions against Iraq. This included the systemic destruction of all components and prospects for Iraqi weapons of mass-destruction.

The results of the war succeeded in achieving several benefits for the position and policies of the US as a super power, including:

The end of the Vietnam Complex, which led a large extent to the reluctance of US troops to intervene abroad.

Proving that any regional or international opposition to the leading role of the US in international conflicts is merely verbal opposition with no real means of action.

Strengthening the cooperative relations between the US and its allies in NATO.

The major industrial powers in the world respond to US financial demands relating to international conflicts.

The possibility of issuing international resolutions from the security council without attempts to obstruct these decisions by countries which have Veto power, in particular Russia and China.

It became clear that in the Middle East matters were balanced in favor of the US. There were no real threats to any regional countries, and there were no threats relating to US strategic interests, especially on oil, since the majority of underground petroleum reserves is under direct US protection.

Therefore the only regional threat was Arab-Israeli conflict, and particularly the Palestinian cause, given the intensity of this conflict and the continuation of the Palestinian Intifada for over five years.

At the end of Gulf war, the US administration through its President and Secretary of State James Baker began accelerated action amongst the countries in the region and other major countries with vested interests, to find a platform for a peace process that could dissolve any volatile eruptions.

II. Attempts to avoid the double standards

The Arab split on the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was not only the result of support for Iraq or of hostility against Kuwait, but was basically evolving from the international and American reactions towards the invasion. Comparisons were made with the US tolerance of the Israeli occupation and aggression against Palestine and other Arab countries. Through pressure by

its Arab allies, amongst other reasons, the US and its allies have realized that there should be a serious attempt to cancel the impact of the concept of double standards, and that this matter must be achieved through implementing the international legitimacy and international resolutions pertaining to Palestine. These are mainly UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338 and other references related to those decisions, especially UN General Assembly resolution 194 on the rights of the Palestinian refugees.

Contrary to the position regarding Iraq, the position on Israel was characterized by a leniency and flexibility which could not completely cancel the conceptual precipitation on the issue of double standards, but the move in itself contributed towards neutralizing popular reactions.

III. The Peace Process

Madrid Conference

After extensive efforts by US Secretary of State James Baker, the Madrid Conference was held in order to become the mechanism called for by resolution 338. The conference targeted the implementation of resolution 242, which stipulates the inadmissibility of occupying the territories of others by force, and to find a just solution to the problem of refugees on the basis of a land for peace formula. This actually means that Israel would enjoy peaceful relations with its neighbors in exchange for returning the territories it occupied in 1967.

The conference was held, reaching basic achievements:

1. A direct meeting at the level of leaders and decision makers between Israel and the confrontation countries, and other representation of several Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia.
2. The establishment of a clear Palestinian delegation albeit restricted under the Jordanian umbrella.
3. A defining of the references of the negotiation process.
4. A continuation of the negotiations later in Washington. However, despite the extensive nature of those talks, they were dull and achieved few, if any, results compared with the efforts and expectations.

Oslo secret channel

The slow nature of Washington negotiations made it clear that they would not achieve results, especially as the Palestinian delegation was restricted by the Madrid constraints. It did not allow the PLO to be at the forefront of the political process in an official, clear and

public manner. Therefore, under Norwegian sponsorship, secret negotiations were conducted between the PLO and representatives of the Israeli government. Those talks resulted in the reaching of the "Declaration of Principles" (DOP) that included the points of agreement and the disputed items. The pragmatic agreement outlined the possibility of proceeding in the peace process in phases, and delaying the complex issues until later stages.

Despite the dramatic breakthrough in the agreement at the level of Palestinian-Israeli relations, and at the level of the future of the whole peace process in the Middle East, the agreement angered many Palestinian and Arab parties. The Palestinian opposition saw in the agreement concessions on basic rights and an implied Palestinian recognition of the state of Israel without any guarantee for an Israeli recognition of Palestinian basic rights. Some Arab countries, such as Syria, saw in the agreement a weakening of its position and a violation of the unified Arab position.

Impact of DOP on the relations between Israel and the Arab countries

Shortly after announcing the Declaration of Principles, the US expressed its approval of this development, and initiated bringing both parties to Washington to conclude the agreement and to sign it at a ceremony. This was a dramatic step with hand shaking taking place between enemies: Yasser Arafat, chairman of the PLO and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. That event constituted a new era in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and made it take on a different dimension that included a *détente* and the implementation of Arab-Israeli relations. This led to official contacts between the Israeli government and several Arab countries, especially in the Gulf and Morocco region. The remarkable development was in Jordan, which proceeded as if the Palestinian-Israeli agreement had given the green light for talks with Israel, and resulted in a peace treaty between Jordan and Israel.

Establishment of the Palestinian Authority

The return of Yasser Arafat, following the return of Palestinian troops in their military uniforms and vehicles, represented a major and dramatic development of the implementation of the Oslo Accord. This in turn had a strong psychological impact on the Palestinian people in the Occupied Territories. As the structures and symbols of the PNA developed, the beginning of efforts to regain Palestinian political and civil rights started to increase. At the same time, the number of parties opposing the agreement also increased, particularly the religious movements, which considered the agreement a recognition of the State of Israel that surrendered many Palestinian rights. The opposition carried out many military operations, with a painful impact on Israeli targets. Despite the security cooperation between the Israeli

authorities and Palestinian security forces, the Israeli authorities took stringent measures against Palestinians. These included closing cities and prohibiting movement and transfers and other occupation measures. The Israeli policies made the Palestinian optimists feel that the Oslo Accord had achieved minimal results, especially when the Israeli government did not abide by the timetables for implementing the articles in the agreement. In addition, the Israeli right wing escalated its opposition against the Declaration of Principles by organizing major rallies that included slogans of incitement. This tense atmosphere was exploited by an Israeli extremist who assassinated the Israeli PM Rabin; the assassination had the potential of causing a serious split in Israeli society.

The Israeli government, headed by Shimon Peres, made use of the public anger towards the extremist right wing and took accelerated steps to implement several commitments towards Palestinians, mainly Israeli troop withdrawal from major cities in the occupied West Bank.

During the early elections that followed the assassination of Rabin, the ruling coalition expected victory, since they benefited from popular sympathy, but the result of the elections was a surprise win by the right-wing coalition, headed by Netanyahu. Their election campaign included slogans calling for halting the peace process and abolishing the Oslo Accord.

In the face of pressure from the international community plus internal and other external pressures, especially from the US, Europe and the Arab parties that had signed peace treaties with Israel (Egypt and Jordan), Netanyahu could do nothing except proceed in implementing the commitments in the agreement. He tried to complicate implementation and alter the real commitments. In sum, two minor agreements were signed in the three-year term of Netanyahu, who tried throughout the period to set obstacles and create opportunities to halt the peace process. Netanyahu's intransigent policy led to direct military confrontations between Israeli troops and Palestinians, resulting in the death of more than 80 persons from both sides within a few days.

One year before the end of the official term of the right-wing government, their policy led the peace process to a deadlock, thus making new elections inevitable. The results led to the defeat of the right wing and the victory of the Labor Party candidate, whose victory was widely considered as popular support for resuming the peace process.

IV. Final status talks

A Second Camp David

Whilst there was some optimism following Ehud Barak's victory, with the belief that the chance to resume the peace process had been regained, Barak showed early signs that were disapproved of by Palestinian, Arab and international parties and some peace movements in Israel. Those signs can be summarized as follow:

1. He resumed the settlement activities in the occupied territories, especially in the Jerusalem region, whilst Netanyahu was forced to freeze such activities during his period.

2. He announced his "red lines" that represented in real terms a challenge to the Declaration of Principles over the four basic final-status issues: Jerusalem, refugees, borders and settlements.

At the same time, the new government took three positive moves, including:

1. Implementing the "Wye River" agreement, which was signed by the right wing government but who refrained from implementing it.

2. Resuming negotiations with Palestinians at various levels.

3. Agreeing to partial withdrawals from areas surrounding Jerusalem; the Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon; the Israeli readiness to make major concessions in the Golan.

All of these steps demonstrated that Barak had intentions to proceed in the political process.

In fact, the most significant development within this context was the extensive negotiations that were held at the summit level in Camp David during July 2000 with full sponsorship and participation by the US President. Although the summit has been temporarily halted, major understandings were reached that allowed the building of bridges connecting the Palestinian and Israeli parties.

The full US participation and the hints made by the US administration on the possibility of offering major funds to the peace process shows very clearly that the US is determined to achieve a peaceful settlement; this implies that achieving such a settlement represents a clear US interest.

V. Prospects of the final solution

The negotiators at Camp David did not reach an agreement in July 2000, with each party returning home. However, there were no signs that the summit failed; on the contrary, despite the fact that what has been disclosed in terms of the results of negotiations was limited, major understandings have been reached including the crossing of red lines that were set by both

sides prior to the summit. On the Jerusalem issue for example, the Israeli delegation crossed the red lines they had set, and on the Palestinian side the insistence on the full return of Palestinian refugees was not to the point of insistence. On the issues of settlements and borders there was clear flexibility on both sides to reach a compromise solution. As for the issue of the Palestinian State, it has become only a matter of time before it is realized.

In spite of all this, there remains a strong reservation about the whole political process that is linked with the potential of the Palestinian State declaration and the required recognition. A few hours after the end of the summit, President Clinton stated that establishing an independent state unilaterally would be a grave mistake. There were also unofficial signs threatening Palestinians with the withdrawal of US economic assistance if they proceed with their plans to declare the state.

It is difficult to understand the significance of this serious reservation; the next few weeks are important in that they might present real signs of some new development by September, or at the latest by November.

VI. The future conditions in the Middle East

Between September 13, 2000 and November 15, 2000 a dramatic and important development must occur in terms of the Middle East crisis, or what is known as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian question. Possible scenarios include:

1. The most optimistic option: Under US guarantees, Palestinian and Israeli sides will reach a final agreement, including specific and clear items that will explain the nature of the solution and its timeline in solving the major issues: Jerusalem, refugees, borders and settlements. According to this solution, the declaration of the state will be on one of the following three dates: September 13, 2000; November 15, 2000 or January 1, 2001. This solution cannot be reached without:

Recognition that East Jerusalem is the sovereign capital of the Palestinian state.

Israeli recognition of resolution 194, including the right of return and compensation for Palestinian refugees. This must include recognition by Israel of its responsibility regarding the tragedy of refugees, and undertaking full moral and material responsibility to find fair solutions for both individuals and the people as a whole.

Mutual recognition of new borders to be agreed upon between both parties.

2. The least optimistic option: Both parties will reach an expansive partial agreement without reaching final positions on sensitive issues relating to refugees, Jerusalem and

settlements. In this case, the most that can be achieved in this agreement is an extensive Israeli withdrawal from no less than 40% -50% from the area of the West Bank.

3. The least pessimistic option: Both sides will not reach an agreement, and in return the Palestinians will declare their state without strong reactions or confrontations by Israel that could create an explosive situation.

4. The most pessimistic option: No agreement will be reached, and Palestinians proceed in declaring their state amid stringent Israeli opposition, leading to the explosion of the whole situation with unforeseen ramifications.

There is another option, albeit unlikely: the collapse of the Israeli government, which would lead to a freeze in the peace process. Such a situation would provide international parties such as the United States, an opportunity to put pressure on Palestinians to delay their declaration of the state until the situation stabilizes in Israel. However, a retreat in the Palestinian position is doubtful, as the internal political situation in Israel would be viewed as a pretext to prevent Palestinians from declaring their state.

In each of these options, the US role and position will be of utmost importance. According to the optimistic scenarios, the US pressure and contributions during the negotiations will be critical in reaching an agreement. Moreover, the US readiness to provide the required financial support for the peace era remains a basic condition to implementing agreements. In the more pessimistic options, US reactions, particularly towards the Palestinian position, will have a critical impact on Palestinian-US relations and Arab-US relations, at both the official and social levels.