

Peace Between Arabs and Israel is Wanted and Possible

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A lot of things have changed since the last time I addressed you eight years ago. Today, to be a moderate in the Arab world has been described as a leap of faith, an act of courage, or sometimes just plain suicidal. But there has never been a time when moderation is more needed in our region than it is today. This book is the story of the Arab moderates, their successes and, equally important, their failures; what they have been trying to achieve and what they have not achieved so far.

Most Arab politicians kiss and don't tell. They are in office for a long time and when they leave, whether it's because they don't want to upset anyone or because they do want to go back to government, they choose not to document their experiences. Therefore, most of the history of our region in the Arab world has been written by outsiders. Of those who do document few do so in English. This book is a humble attempt of documenting my experiences in English. I think I was fortunate to have witnessed a lot of important events having to do with the peace process but also the process of reforming the Arab world and this is an attempt to document those experiences.

I talk about two or three main issues that, in my opinion, are the main challenges to the region today: The peace process and the continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the reform process in the Arab world, or maybe the lack of one, and the issues, of course, of terrorism and fighting terrorism. It's a first-hand account of all these issues. I meant to write only about issues that I participated in so that [while] we might disagree on the interpretation I hope few will be able to disagree on what actually took place. I was at the table on all of the events that I write about.

I argue in the book that on peace the Western world tends to focus on Arab extremists. But at least that on the issue of peace there is an Arab center. Not only is there an Arab center but an Arab center that has been proactive and that has put on the table all the initiatives of this decade to peacefully end the Arab-Israeli conflict. It did that after a heated debate with the radical elements of the Arab world. It won the day, and starting with the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, the Arab moderate position prevailed in putting on the table a peace proposal that would commit, not Arab states neighboring Israel, but the whole of the Arab world to a peace treaty with Israel. And the strength of the Arab peace initiative of 2002, which started with Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah, was the notion that for Israel to grant some painful concessions on its part, the idea of a separate agreement with the Palestinians might not give Israel the security that it needs in order to sign the peace treaty. Therefore, rather than push for a separate peace treaty between Israel and the Palestinians or Israel and the Syrians, the Arab Peace Initiative put on the table a proposal that in return for the end of the occupation of Arab land the whole Arab world—the whole Arab world—would commit itself to a collective peace treaty with Israel; to collective security

guarantees with Israel; and to an end to the conflict with no more claims. I, as an ex-ambassador to Israel, understand perfectly how every Israeli feels about this very point, that after an agreement no Arab would claim pre-1948 Palestine. And the most important offering, an agreed solution to the refugee problem meaning that no Arab claims that four or five million Palestinians would go back to Israel and threaten the demographic nature of the Israeli state—an agreed solution to the refugee problem.

Unfortunately, I think that initiative was not given what it deserved both because the United States was more focused on Iraq and not focused at the time on the Arab-Israeli conflict, and because Israel took the reference in the agreement to mean that the Arabs were talking about sending back four or five million Palestinians when it was clearly not the case. The Arabs did a poor job of marketing the initiative and, therefore, at the time it was not met with strong enthusiasm.

The Arab center went further in 2002-03 in proposing a plan to translate this vision of a two-state solution into concrete steps. Steps that would start with meeting the security needs of Israel and would end with a political horizon for the Palestinians and the two-state solution. That plan, called the road map, in which Jordan played a key role in developing, did not see any reasonable chance of implementation once the war in Iraq started and once the U.S. efforts were all directed towards that war. And so I argue that if we do not have peace today it is not because of the lack of trying on the part of the Arab moderates. They have been at the forefront of all the peace efforts in this decade.

Beyond that, I also try to show in the book the human side of the conflict. It is easy to write about the conflict in analytical terms, but what people don't always appreciate and understand is the psychological divide that exists sometimes between the two peoples and the leaps of faith that people and countries would have to make for peace to come to the region.

The most difficult week in my life was when King Hussein asked me to become ambassador to Israel. Even though to all of you this would be an extremely great honor, to me, a moderate, a spokesman of the delegation for the negotiations, someone who had dealt with the Israelis for a long time it was still difficult to accept and actually go and live there. I went through a lot of internal struggle, I had to make a leap of faith in order to do that. I try to explain this and other antidotes in the book to show what people in the region feel about the conflict. When President Weisman invited me, as he did all the diplomatic corps, to attend Israel's Independence Day in his garden in west Jerusalem, to me and to all Arabs this was the anniversary of the Arab's tragedy, of the Arab's Nakba and the feelings that you go through is an experience when you do that. These are not easy matters but they all point to one fact: that if we are going to let the history of both peoples decide what the future, will be there won't be a future and that as rich as both our histories are they cannot be mutually exclusive. If they are, then we cannot have a solution.

I also talk about the issue of reform in the Arab world which is, in my opinion, one of the principal reasons why the Arab center today is very much on the defensive. We are a dying breed. We are a dying breed because despite our valiant efforts to solve the peace process, we have not solved it. But we are also responsible for not addressing other issues of concern to the Arab society—political reform, good government, economic well-being, cultural diversity. And because the center in the Arab world is a one-issue center—it's focused only on the peace process—not having solved that conflict, it has nothing to show for its efforts and the radical elements in the region are saying, "You have not solved peace when it was your strongest suit,

you have not brought peace and you have not addressed reform. Why should we believe you? Maybe the violent track is a better track to take.” And today in the Arab world Arab moderates have no counter argument. They are partly responsible, as I said, for not embarking on a serious process of reform in our countries.

Today there are two schools of thought in the Arab world. The traditional school of thought that says if you open up the system the radicals come in and, therefore, the solution is to not open up the political systems in the Arab world. That, of course, ignores the fact that the radicals have not been weakened by the continuation of the closed systems. Who among you heard of Hezbollah or Hamas 25 years ago? None. And why? Because they did not exist 25 years ago. Today they are not only in existence, they are very popular in the Arab world because they are talking about a violent track, which in their opinion brings results, but they are also talking about good governance. They are providing services for people, and promising cleaner government than the ruling elite. And so, the reformist school in the Arab world says, “We cannot have a system that continues to give two options to people—either a ruling elite with no system of checks and balances, or a radical ideology which promises or which threatens the political and cultural diversity of society. For other alternatives to emerge there is no option but to open up the system in a gradual, yes, in a gradual but also in a serious manner. This is a process that will take 40 or 50 years. It’s not a process that can happen over night. It’s not something that you can solve with a magic wand, but there is no escaping the fact that unless the political systems are open and the Arab world will continue to lag behind almost every other region of the world in terms of governments.

What can the United States do on both these issues? There is nothing more that the United States can do to help the cause of the Arab moderates than to bring about an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict. I’m a creature of the Oslo process. The Oslo process’ principal philosophy was a gradual approach to the Arab-Israeli peacemaking and the notion that when you tackle the easier problems first and you leave the thornier issues to the end, you build confidence among the parties, confidence that will allow both of them to make the painful compromises necessary. What the process ignores is that while the parties are building confidence the opponents of peace on both sides are using this long period of time to derail the process repeatedly and effectively, and they have done so. In these last 15 years of peacemaking—Oslo was suppose to end only after five, the last 15 years of peacemaking the opponents used all this time in order to shatter the confidence that exists between the two parties and today that confidence is at an all-time low. In my opinion any going back to a gradual process is only a gift to the radicals, it’s only a gift to those who do not want peace to come to our region. But fortunately, the framework for a solution today exists and it’s not a framework that is imposed by a superpower or the United States or anybody else. It is a framework that has already been negotiated among the parties themselves. We only have to look at the Clinton parameters, the talks that followed, the Arab Peace Initiative, the Geneva documents—I can name a series of frameworks that have been arrived at among the parties and that have tackled everything from Jerusalem to refugees to borders, to security. And, yes, while I admit that no detailed solutions were arrived at, I still maintain that these frameworks have already defined the outer parameters of a solution and I still maintain that no amount of negotiations will bring us closer to what the parties have already done.

So, we today are not in search of a political framework. We are in search of a political will to bring about the two parties to finally make the deal and there is no one but the United States that can do this. Conventional wisdom in the region had it that the U.S. administration takes the Arab-Israeli conflict in their second term, because the president is speaking of his legacy because, this is the conventional wisdom in the Arab world; he is freer from the Jewish lobby and can

make freer decisions, etc. That is not supported by fact. No U.S. president has taken the Arab-Israeli conflict in his second term and succeeded, not one. If you look at all the efforts of President Clinton to solve the conflict or if you look at the current attempts to solve the conflict after seven years of disengagement from the process, these are not going to be successful efforts.

The only successful efforts from U.S. intervention came when the United States took on the Arab-Israeli conflict in a president's first term. Whether it was President Carter in 1978 with the Camp David Accords and the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, or whether it is President Bush senior and the Madrid Peace Conference, these were all initiatives that were taken in the administrations first term. If there is any suggestion that I would give to either Mr. McCain or Mr. Obama it is that they should take on the Arab-Israeli conflict in their first term. They have all the ammunition they need, they have the framework they need for a solution. But if we are to wait until all the stars are properly aligned in the Palestinian camp and in the Israeli camp and in the regional camp we are not going to arrive at a solution.

And today, ironically, a solution is as much in Israel's interest and it is in the Arab world's interest. Why? Simply because of the demographic issue. Israel today is a nation of six million Israelis, one million of them are Arabs. If you add to that the 3.8 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza under occupation you have today a situation where the number of Jews in Israel is almost equal to the number of Arabs. And in a few years time, not in the distant future, the number of Arabs will outnumber the number of Jews. So what will Israel do? If Israel does not opt for a two-state solution and Israel cannot support a one-state solution, in which all people under its control become citizens and thereby destroy the nature of the Jewish state, what option does Israel have? To continue the occupation indefinitely? A two-state solution today is in everybody's interest. It's not a gift that anybody is giving to one side or the other. Prime Minister Rabin understood this, understood it very well, and stopped the talking about the Palestinian entity, he did not call it a state, in 1994. And then Mr. Sharon and Mr. Olmert in Israel started talking about the Palestinian state ten years down the road.

What about groups like Hamas and Hezbollah? In my opinion, a separate solution between Israel and the Palestinians today, a separate solution is not possible precisely because in the context of an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, Israel is going to feel that it is not signing an agreement with the whole of the Palestinian community, that half the Palestinian community does not want an agreement with it and might jeopardize it in one way or another through Hamas. But if Israel signs an agreement with the whole Arab world in which the whole Arab world commits, as it did already with the Arab Peace Initiative, to an agreement a group such as Hamas becomes a very minor player.

Unfortunately, the United States' support for the reform process in the Arab world in recent years might have been almost the kiss of death because of the perception that there has been a double standards, because of the perception that the United States started pushing very strongly for reform but once it saw that it was also not to its liking it suddenly withdrew. Therefore, reform in the Arab world must be the responsibility of the Arab center, of the Arab moderates, and a home-grown process must be initiated by the Arab center if that center is to be credible and consistent in the Arab world and popular at the same time. Once that happens then I believe the United States and the international community can be supportive of such a process.

So, just to sum up. I believe that on the one hand that if Israel wants to be accepted as a member of the neighborhood then it has to work for the rights of the Palestinians to live free of occupation and have their own state. And if the Arab center, if the Arab moderates, are to rid themselves of



the image their opponents are painting of them in the Arab world today—of being compromisers of Arab life or apologists for the West—they also must plant the seeds for the time when the peace process will end but the challenge of a pluralistic democratic and prosperous society remains.

Thank you very much.

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