



The Art Of The Middle East Peace Deal

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Can President Donald Trump broker the Israeli-Palestinian deal of a lifetime? After his trip to Israel, there is certainly cause for hope.

Settling the major issues between Israel and the Palestinian Authority has been an *idee fixe* for successive American presidential administrations. Negotiators and policymakers have foundered on the seemingly intractable contradictions in the process, whether conflicting non-negotiable demands, bad faith on the part of negotiators or willingness to walk away from a deal just to prove a point.

Trump comes to the scene as a political outsider, unburdened by the failed diplomatic frameworks of the past. He brings his business perspective and experience, in which deals are based on mutual interest and mutual gain, and more concerned with good outcomes than the pageantry of the process.

The same issues are there, of course; national recognition, where to draw borders, where to recognize capitals, the respective right of Palestinian refugees and Israeli settlers, water access, trade relations and security protocols, among others. Previous negotiations have broken down over one or more of these issues. But no issues are impossible to come to terms on, provided both parties understand that reaching a deal or a series of deals is more in their interest than continuing the status quo.

The strategic circumstances are evolving in a way that makes a bargain more likely. In the past, the Palestinians could count on durable diplomatic and financial backing from a host of Muslim countries that had taken up their cause, based on a mix of ethno-religious solidarity and opposition to Israel. This dynamic has changed significantly in recent years.

Given the increasing power and influence of Shiite Iran, many Sunni Arab countries are more willing to see Israel as a strategic partner than a pariah. They share a common adversary in Tehran, and as the region's only nuclear-armed state Israel has a significant deterrent capacity. Indeed, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are on the verge of making an unprecedented offer to partially normalize relations with Israel in exchange for limited gestures towards the Palestinians, which is a promising development. Trump's direct flight from Saudi Arabia to Israel was also seen as a significant diplomatic signal.

Palestinian leaders must realize that their cause is not as important as it used to be to many countries in the region. The ground has shifted beneath them. The Iran issue, the dramatic long-term slump in oil prices, the rise of Israel's economy and the threat of the Islamic State group and other violent extremist movements have all made supporting the Palestinian cause a second- or third-tier concern. Thus, the time to make a deal is as soon as possible, while they still have some affinity from their Arab cousins.

Israel also will benefit from reaching some form of accommodation with the Palestinians. A reasonable deal - not necessarily a comprehensive one - would make it easier for regional states to draw closer to Israel to stand up against Iran's bid for regional hegemony. It would also cut the legs from under the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions, or BDS, movement, which has been a persistent diplomatic and economic nuisance. And it would further isolate and delegitimize Hamas, which is certain to want nothing to do with any peace accord.

Trump could well be the American leader who could bring a deal together. His recent trip to the region showed that he has the respect of all the parties involved. His close personal ties to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will allow him to deal more frankly with him than President Barack Obama could, without generating ill will. For his part, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas said that he was willing to begin negotiations immediately. How this plays out remains to be seen, but the prospects for peace have never been better. The results will come through the art of the deal.

James S. Robbins is senior fellow for national security affairs at the American Foreign Policy Council.