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Analyzing Trump's Middle East peace

Chronicling latest attempt to untie Gordian knot of the ongoing conflict

By ERIC R MANDEL DECEMBER 10, 2020 16:19



PRIME MINISTER Benjamin Netanyahu, US President Donald Trump and UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed signed normalization deals at the White House on September 15.
(photo credit: REUTERS/TOM BRENNER)



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Israel's normalization of relations with Arab Gulf countries occurring before a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, previously presumed a prerequisite by the international community, now opens the door to new possibilities and a fresh approach to resolving the conflict, unencumbered by a Palestinian Authority veto.

As Aaron David Miller, a long-standing Middle East peace negotiator under many American presidents, said, the peace treaties "upended American thinking about the centrality of the Israel-Palestinian dispute long considered to be the core of the broader Arab-Israeli conflict." The newly developing Arab relations with the Jewish state may now mean that President Donald Trump's peace proposal, so disparaged by the international community, which failed to anticipate the possibility of such an Arab-Israeli rapprochement, may now deserve a new look. It offered a comprehensive plan and map that prioritized Israel's security issues along with a contiguous Palestinian state on 70% of the land, albeit with bridges and tunnels. The proposal could form the basis for future negotiations if the PA prioritizes the economic advancement of its people over its desire to end the Jewish state.

Neville Teller's new book is the first comprehensive examination of the Trump peace plan from its beginning in 2016 to its unveiling in January 2020, "set against the backdrop of a turbulent Middle East." Any book that focuses on Trump will elicit a strong reaction even before the reader opens the first page. Teller bravely enters the lion's den, chronicling the first three-plus years of the Trump administration's attempt to untie the Gordian knot of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Whether you think Trump is the most pro-Israel American ever, as the majority of Israeli Jews do, or you think his stopping Palestinian funding and withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal are bad for America and Israel, as many progressive Americans do, his imprint on the region will reverberate for many years. Whether his peace plan will be seen as groundbreaking or irrelevant is not known.

During the tumultuous [Trump](#) years, there were so many policy decisions, some good, such as the US Embassy move to Jerusalem and some bad, such as his abandoning the Syrian Kurds. Therefore, reviewing his years in depth as Teller does is an important exercise in attempting to understand where the region may be headed, as the effects of his policies will echo well into the next administration.



What is fascinating in reading Teller's excellent review of the region and the development of the Trump plan is how much we have already forgotten or perhaps never knew even occurred in the region since 2016. For that alone the book is worth reading. Teller presents a chronological history progressing toward the ultimate "Deal of the Century" while offering a

historical record that will also be appreciated by serious students of the conflict.

WHAT THE Trump team realized and acted upon, but the preceding administrations refused to see, was the reality that the PA was incapable of signing an end of conflict agreement, including putting an end to the right of return for descendants of Palestinian refugees. So the thesis of the Trump team was to first turn to normalization between Israel and the Arab world to provide a cover for the Palestinian negotiators. The international community condemned the Trump plan because it did not follow their two-state formula, which had failed so many times before.

The book was written before Israel and the [UAE](#) and Bahrain normalized relations, but the signposts that the region was changing began when Trump moved the American embassy to Jerusalem and the Middle East didn't implode. The Arab world barely reacted and the Palestinians didn't launch another intifada.

As Teller writes, Trump wanted to be the one to solve the conflict by using his business experience as a guide, saying, "Deals are made when parties come together, they come to a table and they negotiate." Trump's strategy required an Arab buy-in, which is why his team spent the first few years repeatedly visiting the Gulf states, Egypt and Jordan to lay the groundwork for the current normalization agreements and potential new relationships with Israel in the future. But the elephant in the room that motivated the Arab Muslim world to move on past the Palestinians was the shared common interest in thwarting Iran's quest for hegemony and dominance in the region.

Teller presents the peace process evolution against the backdrop of the Syrian civil war, Iran's malign influence in the region, and Saudi and Gulf state antagonism to Qatar, while incorporating all the players including Turkey, the PA and Hamas. He describes Trump's approach to the Middle East as having "one firm objective - to confront Islamist extremism in the Middle East, and not wholly for its own sake, but as one vital element in a determined effort to broker an Arab-Israeli understanding leading to an Israeli-Palestinian peace accord." Interestingly, Teller says the Trump team "deliberately set no time limit on their enterprise, convinced that painstakingly slow consolidation of each small step along the way was the key to bringing their enterprise to a successful conclusion," and understood correctly that the 1949 armistice line was not sacrosanct as a border, much less a defensible security line for Israel.

Neville Teller's *Trump and the Holy Land: 2016-2020* is a worthwhile read for anyone who cares about the Middle East, America and the US-Israel relationship.



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TRUMP AND THE HOLY LAND: 2016-2020: THE DEAL OF THE CENTURY

By Neville Teller

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