

# COMMENTARY

No. 423

Friday, 19 May 2017

## **NOT a New Era for Israelis and Palestinians (for better and worse)**

**Paul Scham**

### **Partners for Progressive Peace**

President Trump has certainly made good on his promise to shake things up in Washington – and around the world. I assume most readers of this article are as unhappy and angry about most (if not all) of what he’s doing as I am – and are appalled at the prospect of four more years on this roller-coaster. But one area seems likely to proceed on its traditional voyage to nowhere, oblivious to Trump’s various promises about a ‘great deal’ and similar nonsense. That, of course, would be the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

This is written after a week in which Bibi and Trump held their first meeting as heads of government, which produced the expected hugs and kisses and, as well, blaring headlines about the U.S. “abandoning” the two state solution, which has already been pronounced dead or nearly so for years. Maybe it is, probably it isn’t, but Trump’s pronouncement certainly did not cause its demise. In fact, his statement, like most of his shoot-from-the hip remarks, almost certainly means little, other than giving further impetus to the stalemate (yes, I know it’s an oxymoron) that has prevailed for years.

In fact, probably the only ones really affected by it are the supporters of the Israeli far right in Israel, the US, and elsewhere. Many of them apparently made the (always dangerous) mistake of taking Trump’s pronouncements seriously. Sometimes they are followed through more often they are not, and sometimes his policy direction is totally different. Anyone who followed the news lately has seen more examples of this than, they can keep track of. Trump “promised a series of moves that gladdened their hearts; now they don’t know what to think (welcome to the club!).

Unlike issues such as immigration and trade where he also made very specific promises and has actually attempted to follow through, his Israel/Palestine-related measures have been conspicuous by their absence. Moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem? Seemingly not happening.

A free hand on settlements? Two softly-worded but unexpectedly clear admonitions not to go crazy with them. Jared Kushner making peace? No sign of it. And even David Friedman, Trump's nominee as ambassador to Israel, notorious for his particularly vicious slanders and support for the most extreme ideas on the far, far right, is now desperately attempting to appear to be a born-again moderate supporting two states (not that I believe him, obviously).

In fact, one could well argue that Trump's main effect on this issue so far is to provide a new impetus to those of us who do believe in two states and the long-term viability of Israeli/Palestinian peace, after 8 years during which our hopes were repeatedly dashed. I should note that I am, on most issues, an admirer of Barack Obama, and even more so now that he has been succeeded by someone appallingly antithetical to the high standard of morality, patriotism, and erudition that Obama set. But no one can maintain that Obama succeeded with regard to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. His high hopes and ideals invariably flopped and he was out-manoeuvred by Bibi Netanyahu at almost every turn. Unlike with most of his other failed initiatives, he cannot blame the obstructionist Republican-controlled Congress for this. Even his long-overdue abstention on UNSCR 2334, condemning Israeli settlements, was so late that it had little or no impact. The only success he had in this arena was in negotiating and pushing through the Iran deal, which is not really "Israel/Palestine," though it certainly makes Israel safer and removed one of Bibi's favourite fear points.

Trump's ignorance of and, seeming lack of concern with the issue forces us now to focus on the parties themselves and removes the vain hope we held for so long that a Hawaii-born deus ex machina would somehow resolve the conflict and sweep away the obstacles erected by the parties themselves. One thing American liberals (not only, but especially American Jews ) can do is to educate themselves regarding Israeli peace and social justice initiatives, which often get lost in the flurry of internationally-based news. Israelis are hurting economically – as shown most spectacularly by the 2011 'tent cities' protests – a fact most Americans are only dimly, if at all, aware of. This is illustrated by a favourite factoid of mine from a 2016 Pew Research Centre poll. Thirty-nine per cent of Israelis named economic as Israel's main problem, while only one per cent of American Jews thought it was Israel's most important problem.

Prof. Danny Gutwein of Haifa University is one of Israel's most prominent public intellectuals addressing this issue and connecting the issues of occupation and economy. For those planning to attend the upcoming J-Street Conference Feb. 25-28 here in Washington, D.C., he will be

speaking there, as well as many others who will be discussing priorities for this current period. For more information on Danny Gutwein, see the PPI blog. He will also be speaking on the subject at the University of Maryland in College Park on Feb. 28 and in New York later that week.

This comes at a time when the parameters of the Israel/Arab conflict are changing fundamentally. The cornerstone of Israeli foreign policy for many years was opposition to dealing with the Palestinian issue in an international or regional forum, because it feared being ganged up on by the Arab states. It is a mirthless irony that Bibi and parts of the Israeli right are now hawking a regional 'solution' to the Palestinian issue, based on the very real perception that in recent years many of the major Arab states are now more fearful of ISIL and Iran, enemies of both Israel and those states, than they are of Israel. However, what the right will not understand is that the sine qua non for ANY open peace or deals with any Arab country has an absolute precondition of first allowing for the creation of a Palestinian state. The governments of those states realize that their own domestic legitimacy cannot withstand a deal with Israel that ignores the Palestinians. It is time that Bibi recognized that too.

The even bitterer irony is that for most of its existence, Israel has claimed that the enmity of the Arab states prevented peace. Now, it is the Arab states who want peace – otherwise Bibi would not be hawking his regional plan – but the settlers and their allies who support the occupation refuse to allow progress on that front. They are essentially holding Israel hostage to their messianic dreams – and harming Israel's real security, which can only come with its recognition of a Palestinian state and the peace with most, if not all, Arab states, which would follow. They are the true dangers to Israel.

I am not at all blasé regarding the very real threats that President Trump poses to the US and to the whole world. However, he may be (totally inadvertently) doing a real service to the grassroots efforts to further Israeli/Palestinian peace. But there is no time to lose! He may well say something completely different tomorrow.

**Note:** This article was originally published in *Partners for Progressive Peace* and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: <http://progressiveisrael.org/not-a-new-era-for-israelis-and-palestinians-for-better-and-worse/>

**Professor Paul Scham is the Executive Director of the Gildenhorn Institute for Israel Studies at the University of Maryland and he blogs Partners for Progressive Peace. Email: [paulscham@gmail.com](mailto:paulscham@gmail.com)**

---

**As part of its editorial policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spelling and date formats to make the text uniformly accessible and stylistically consistent. The views**

**expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of the MEI@ND. Editor, MEI@ND: P R Kumaraswamy**