

# This is a real chance for peace in the Middle East

Since 1993 the Palestinians could have had their state, though it would have been a modest one. But they fought on, oblivious to the evaporation of their bargaining position.

by Conrad Black



**The U.S. Middle East peace initiative** has been largely lost in the distractions of the doomed and outrageous attempt to impeach the president of the United States and the coronavirus epidemic that has already caused the quarantine of 60 million Chinese (almost the entire population of France). Because it is Donald Trump's, and importantly contributed to by his son-in-law Jared Kushner, and the entire traditional approach to peace-making has been jettisoned and replaced, most observers are dubious, beyond what is always somewhat justified in that part of the world. This is not an unreasonable reflex, given that no substantive negotiations have achieved anything useful in the Middle East since the assassination of Egyptian

president Anwar Sadat in 1981.

A radical change in approach is justified because of the large shift in the correlation of forces in the region. To the end of the 20th century Israel was facing quite solid Arab opposition, and the United States was importing 15 million barrels of oil per day and had to pay some attention to the desires of the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, a feudal country that was a joint venture between the nomadic House of Saud and the leadership of the radical Wahhabi Muslims. The entire Muslim world, in varying degrees, paid lip-service and gave some tangible assistance to the cause of the Palestinians, whose leadership militantly declined to accept Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state.

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Two of Israel's most militant Arab enemies, Syria and Iraq, have disintegrated and are failed states and are largely occupied (Syria), satellized (Shiite Iraq), or sundered into autonomous zones (Kurdistan). Both countries suffer widespread violence, total disruption and have millions of refugees. The United States is now the world's largest oil producer and a net exporter. The Palestinian leadership is bitterly divided between Hamas in Gaza and the Palestine Liberation Organization on the West Bank (of the Jordan River). Saudi Arabia, under heavy American pressure, has stopped subsidizing Wahhabi fundamentalists (who have often incited terrorism), and is in the hands, finally, of a grandson of the original King Saud, who is cautiously modernizing Saudi society. Turkey and Persia (Iran), ancient enemies of the Arabs, are encroaching on the Arabs again, the Turks in Syria and Iran in Iraq and by subsidizing Hamas and Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen. After the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on Sept. 11, 2001, and many other outrages in Europe and elsewhere, there is a general coalition of almost all countries against terrorism and countries that support

terrorism such as Iran.

And Israel has had 20 years of bracing economic progress and now has a standard of living of an advanced country, 93 per cent of Canada's GDP per capita, and a higher average income than France, Japan or the United Kingdom. It is an astounding success story; there are many who were alive when Israel was set up essentially as an embryonic homeland for the Jewish people, half of whose worldwide population had been exterminated in the preceding decade by Nazi Germany and its emulators. This was the Israel that, when it gained independence in 1948, was largely as Pontius Pilate allegedly described it in Tiberian times: "A land of sand, camels and Jehovah." It has officially been at war with many of those who tried to strangle it in its cradle ever since.

The Palestinian leadership never understood that the Arab powers were chiefly interested in them to distract the Arab masses from the despotic misrule their rulers inflicted on them; the Palestinians themselves were generally regarded by most Arabs as sharpers like the Jews and the Lebanese Christians. When the Arab leaders were shaken by terrorist threats, encroached upon by Iran and Turkey (when it recoiled from its rebuff by the European Union) and Egypt dodged the bullet of the Muslim Brotherhood that had been the 800-pound gorilla within for 75 years, the game changed entirely. (The Muslim Brotherhood was elected after the George W. Bush championship of democracy produced an anti-democratic election result, which also elevated Hamas in Gaza. The Egyptian army overthrew the elected government when it showed its dictatorial intentions. If Egypt had gone the way of Islamist Iran, the consequences would have been grievous.)



Demonstrators set fire to Israeli and U.S. flags during a protest against U.S. President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan, in Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp, near Sidon, Lebanon, on Jan. 29, 2020. Ali Hashisho/Reuters

The threats to the main Middle Eastern Arab powers – Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan – are from the fundamentalist Muslims, led and bankrolled by Iran (until the Trump administration put the sanction screws on the ayatollahs). And their most powerful and reliable ally is Israel (which has also benefited from the discovery of offshore oil and natural gas, which it generously shares with Jordan). The Palestinian militants are starved for funds and with terrorism thoroughly out of fashion and subject to fierce reprisals, Middle East peacekeeping is more promising than it has been. It is no longer the hopeless process of trying to get the Palestinian leadership to agree to anything useful. From the 1973 (Yom Kippur) War on, they tried “land for peace,” which effectively meant land the Arabs had lost in wars they had initiated with Israel and regained, in exchange for ceasefires, which they quickly violated. Israeli leaders Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres and PLO leader Yasser Arafat won the Nobel Prize for Peace for the Oslo Accord in 1993, which required the PLO to amend the Palestine National Charter to accept Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state and pledged to assist in disarming terrorists and reduce its own arms level to that of a well-equipped police force of 40,000. All of these, and other commitments, have been ignored. At any point since then the Palestinians could have had their state, though it would have been a modest one. But they fought on, oblivious to the evaporation of their bargaining position. With peace, Arafat, and Mahmoud Abbas who followed him, would have ceased to be world personalities and would have been only the leaders of a dusty little country.



Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas speaks in Ramallah, in the West Bank, on Jan. 28, 2020. Raneen Sawafta/Reuters  
Their bluff was called, the U.S. moved its embassy to Jerusalem, financial support dried up and neither the PLO nor Hamas retains much enthusiastic support from the suffering Palestinians, whom everyone except the Israelis has used as cannon-fodder these 70 years. Now, instead of the usual four-to-six-page outline, subject to detailed discussion with PLO

leaders who don't want to reach an agreement, the U.S. has produced an 80-page, mapped-out framework document keeping 97 per cent of Israelis and Palestinians where they are, promising a secure tunnel between the West Bank and Gaza, an expanded Gaza, a four-year standstill on new Israeli settlements to encourage negotiations, and \$50 billion of economic assistance for the Palestinians. The right of return of displaced Palestinians would be to Palestine and not Israel, as the Palestinian leaders have been demanding since Israel was established (in order to outnumber the Jews and oppress, expel or exterminate them one more time). The Trump proposals have been encouraged by the leading Arab powers and politely received by the Europeans, who in their frequent delusional periods imagine they have some influence in the area, and by the United Nations (subject to more prolonged bouts of the same fantasy).

The Palestinian public will hopefully grasp the possibilities of this arrangement, however disturbed their leaders are that peace might break out, and the United States and its regional allies can effectively impose something like this plan, which is tabled to both sides as the basis of negotiation and has been accepted by the government and chief opposition of Israel. Trump has given himself his whole second term to complete and implement the agreement. It is the best chance peace has had in the Middle East since the British and French evicted the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire in 1918. Corrupt and decrepit though the Ottomans were, "the Sick Man of Europe" threw the Allies into the sea at Gallipoli (almost ending Winston Churchill's political career), outlasted the Russians in the First World War and provided better government than most of what has followed in the Middle East, apart from Israel. Once again, the improbable Donald Trump may have caught history at a decisive turning point.

First published in the