

The Israeli-Palestinian peace process is dead. An expert explains why.  
“If your solution does not include self-determination for everyone, and basic civil, human, and political rights for everyone — it’s not a real process.”

By Alexia Underwood alexia.underwood@vox.com Apr 15, 2019, 9:18am EDT

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A woman passes in front of the graffiti that depicts a Palestinian flag in the city center of Amman on February 12, 2019. Artur Widak/NurPhoto/Getty Images

One big question that’s bound to come up in the 2020 presidential election is where do the candidates stand on Israel? It’s an issue that some say is already threatening to split apart the Democratic Party.

Meanwhile, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process — which the US attempted to broker for decades — has basically disappeared from view.

Though President Donald Trump’s son-in-law and White House senior adviser Jared Kushner is working on a peace plan, there’s been almost zero Palestinian input. And Israel’s recent election, which will almost certainly allow right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to maintain his grip on power after he promised to extend sovereignty over large portions of the West Bank, does not bode well for any future vision of peace that includes an independent Palestinian state.

For these reasons and others, there’s a good chance that Kushner’s plan will be dead on arrival.

America’s consistent attempts and failures to broker peace are striking — and a new book by Middle East scholar Khaled Elgindy argues that it’s due to a particular “blind spot” the US has toward the Palestinians.

Elgindy served as an adviser to the Palestinian leadership in the West Bank on peace negotiations in the 2000s and is currently a fellow in the Middle East center at the Brookings Institution think tank in Washington, DC.

I reached out to him to talk about why the US has failed to broker peace, what role Trump has played in all of this, and how the issue of Israel and the Palestinians will continue to reverberate in the runup to the 2020 election.

A transcript of our conversation, edited for clarity and length, is below.

Alexia Underwood

So let’s start by talking about the US’s “blind spot,” which is the title of your book. Explain what that means.

Khaled Elgindy

The blind spot refers to two areas of diplomacy that American policymakers traditionally have tended to downplay or ignore altogether: Israeli power and Palestinian politics.

The United States has the tendency to treat the two parties as though they were somehow co-equal in power, when in reality, one party is occupying the other. Israel is an occupying power. So it's not only a conflict, it's also an occupation.

We've seen various moments in history where that plays out very dramatically. For example, when the Israeli army was besieging Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's compound during the second intifada [Palestinian uprising] in 2002, that's not something that you would see in other contexts. In the negotiations between Egypt and Israel in the 1970s leading up to the 1979 Peace Treaty between the two countries, Israeli tanks didn't surround Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's headquarters, right?

However, the United States tends to treat the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations like it did with those negotiations between Egypt and Israel, or the Northern Ireland negotiations: If we can just get the two leaders in the room to sit around the negotiating table, they can decide on the difficult compromises.

The other side, the flip side of this blind spot, is Palestinian politics.

American politicians instinctively understand that when you're negotiating [with a foreign power], you're not only negotiating with the person in front of you; you're negotiating with their political opposition, with their public opinion, and so on.

Americans understand that there are certain things you can push the Israelis to do and not do because of their own domestic political pressures. But when it comes to the Palestinians, the tendency is to treat them as if they don't have politics, as if they don't have a political opposition that they have to answer to, or a public opinion. It's not only that they don't understand the nuances of Palestinian politics. It's that they treat them as though they don't have politics at all.

So it's this sort of twin blind spot — where the Americans downplay Israeli power, especially its ability to dictate realities on the ground, and also neglect of Palestinian politics — that has hampered the US ability to act as an effective broker.

But to add to this, America's role in the peace process wasn't only ineffective, it actually made things worse because it exaggerated that already significant power imbalance. And where are we today?

We've got a triumphant Israeli government saying, essentially, we won. The settler project is a huge success. And on the other side is this broken, dysfunctional, divided Palestinian leadership that is barely capable of governing the few cantons under its jurisdiction: the West Bank and Gaza. It's a very dysfunctional reality.

Alexia Underwood

So what's happened, then, under the Trump administration? Have they made things worse?

Khaled Elgindy

You know, in some ways they've made things worse, but in some ways I would argue they've actually helped clarify certain things.

There are a couple of different ways to look at the Trump administration. You could say, "Well they've adopted a radically different approach." It's not at all clear that they actually support a real two-state solution. They've essentially thrown out the old peace process. That's one way to look at it.

Another way to look at it is, "Well, this administration is basically doing, in a very extreme form, what its predecessors had already started doing." They just took it to its most extreme conclusion.

So take, for example, [UN Resolution 242](#), which has been the basic guidepost for the peace process for more than 50 years. It's based on the principle of [land for peace](#): that [Israel would withdraw from land that it occupied in the 1967 war, in exchange for peace and recognition and normalization with the Arabs.](#)

That was the formula that was used in 1979 with Egypt. And Egypt got the Sinai Peninsula back [which Israel had captured in the 1967 war]. That was the formula in the negotiations in 2000 between Israel and Syria. And that was also the basis for the Oslo Accords [the set of agreements between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1993 and 1995 that kicked off the "Oslo process" — negotiations aimed at getting a peace treaty between the two sides].

US policy was always to frown on Israeli settlements because Israeli settlements directly interfere in that land-for-peace formula. How can you give up land if you're eating the pie as you negotiate, right? You're negotiating over how to divvy up the pie, but one side is consuming it.

But though the official position was "settlements are bad," every US president since the Oslo process began basically carving out loopholes for Israel. They would say, "Yeah, settlements are bad. Israel shouldn't do it, but I know how important Jerusalem is to you, so go ahead and build in East Jerusalem even though that's technically still occupied territory. We're going to treat East Jerusalem different than the rest of the West Bank."

And then other administrations came in and said, "Well, you know these settlement blocks [in the West Bank] are probably going to be part of Israel anyway, so go ahead and build there too."

So what ends up happening, then, is that those exceptions become the rule. You've gone from something like 270,000 Israeli settlers [in the West Bank and East Jerusalem] in 1993 to now more than double that, around 630,000.

We didn't get here by accident. We got here because of all those loopholes and allowances and exemptions that were carved out for Israel, because the US and Israel have that "special relationship," and because the US wanted to accommodate Israeli politics, and imposing a settlement freeze is too hard for an Israeli prime minister to justify to their cabinet or to their political opponents.

So we're always willing to compromise on these basic rules of the peace process. But in doing that, the consequences are that the settlement enterprise thrived. And they now feel that they are victorious. And land for peace is basically dead.

The word I use in the book for that contradictory position is "ambivalence." It's not a very sexy word, but it shows how the US has one position yet holds the opposite position at the same time.

When President Barack Obama came in, I think he recognized the dangers of that ambivalence — that if you're going to take a position on something, you ought to mean it. Obama said, "I want to stop the settlements. Not some settlements, not just small settlements. All settlements." He tried to go back to the original peace process. The basic ground rules.

But he didn't put any teeth into it. He wasn't prepared to impose any consequences on Israel for not being up to those standards.

So then here comes Trump, and he says, "You know what? I have a different way of resolving this basic contradiction, which is to simply normalize the new reality on the ground — the old rules don't really apply anymore because there are these realities on the ground, and that's the new basis for a peace process going forward."

The problem with that view is that it's totally arbitrary. It's one that is dictated by power. That Israel essentially takes what it wants and we, the United States, will endorse that, and whatever is left over can go to the Palestinians.

If, say, Hillary Clinton had won and she was president and was inclined to start a peace process, it would have looked a lot like the Obama peace process. It may have also looked a lot like Bill Clinton's peace process, where they sort of blur the lines, and fudge the issues, and go through the process for its own sake. You create the illusion of a process even though nobody thinks it's going anywhere.

I think Trump is the blind spot in its most extreme manifestation. He's almost a caricature of the blind spot. But by taking things to their absurd extreme, he's created a clarifying moment for people, so a lot of Democrats are now like, "Oh, my god. This is not

acceptable.” Maybe there are even some Republicans out there who are uncomfortable with these new dynamics.

Alexia Underwood

So you’re saying that Trump has done away with the illusion.

Khaled Elgindy

Yes, he’s done away with the pretense and the illusion and all of that. Now we’re facing this stark choice: Are we supporting a two-state solution or we supporting a binational, one-state solution? Or are we getting behind what is effectively an apartheid reality on the ground? By unblurring the lines, he’s kind of put those options in stark focus.

Courtesy of Khaled Elgindy

Alexia Underwood

Let’s talk for a moment about his administration’s Middle East peace proposal, the so-called “**deal of the century**” that Jared Kushner has been working on. Many people think it’s going to be dead upon arrival. But **what would it need to actually have a chance of success?**

Khaled Elgindy

Let me answer that question in a slightly different way. There’s basically a litmus test that you can apply to see whether this is a serious thing.

First is does it call for an **end to Israeli occupation**? Does it actually say “end to occupation,” the way every president before Trump has? Second, does it **refer to UN Resolution 242**? Again, this is the basic, big ground rule of the peace process. And third, does it call for the **creation of a sovereign Palestinian state**?

If it doesn’t meet all three of those standards, then we’re not even at the **most minimal requirements** of a pretend peace process.

Then we have to broaden the criteria. If we’re not talking about a two-state solution, what are we talking about? Does whatever you’re calling for allow for self-determination for both Israelis and Palestinians? Or **does it simply repackage the subjugation of one group over another one?**

If your solution does not include self-determination for everyone, and basic civil, human, and political rights for everyone, then it’s not a real process. Any plan that is based on or implies the continued **subjugation of one group over the other is just repackaging the conflict and perpetuating it.**

Alexia Underwood

Okay. I think we can say based on what we know that **this plan doesn't meet those requirements**. So what comes next? What's the next effective step that Palestinians and Israelis can take?

Khaled Elgindy

I don't see a diplomatic process on the horizon. It's possible that one could emerge at a later stage, but currently there's no replacement to either an old Oslo process or to the United States as the chief mediator. And so we've got a bit of a vacuum there.

But we also have a dysfunctional reality on the ground.

I think if the **Palestinians**, especially as the weakened party, **are going to change their circumstances**, it's not going to come from the United States. It's not going to come from the Israelis. It's probably not going to come from the United Nations. It's going to **have to start with themselves first**.

Right now the only party that really wants to radically alter the status quo is the Palestinians, and I think the **first step** to doing that is going to **have to be to fix their own house**, to put their political house in order. **Ending the division between the West Bank and Gaza and the political split between Hamas [the Palestinian organization that rules Gaza] and Fatah [the Palestinian organization that runs the government in the West Bank]** is the first step, but it's also kind of a necessary but insufficient condition. That's only the beginning. Then the Palestinians have to decide what is the future of these institutions.

The Palestinians need a new kind of constitutional moment, a new consensus-building process that will redefine the Palestinian national movement, its priorities, its institutions, its strategy, because clearly all the old ones are either broken or failed or have disappeared.

I think it's really important for them to start thinking about these issues — not just reconciliation, but also what happens after.

Alexia Underwood

Given all this, I'm curious to hear what you think about how the conversation around Israel and the Palestinians is shifting in the US. Some people on the progressive left seem more willing to talk about the Palestinians' situation. Do you think this is something that's going to come up in the 2020 election?

Khaled Elgindy

Yeah, I think it is going to be a factor, because if nothing else, the Republicans will make it a factor.

We've already seen how. We have this emerging division inside Democratic ranks, within the party, that the Republicans are very keen on exploiting. We saw that with the

anti-BDS [Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions] legislation, which they immediately tabled as soon as the government shutdown ended.

I know a lot of folks in the Democratic establishment are nervous. They would rather not be divided on any particular issues, because they need a united front to be able to defeat Trump and all that. And I think the impulse of most of the campaigns will be to avoid this issue as much as they can.

But I think it will be very hard to avoid for two reasons: One, the Republicans will make it an issue, to put Democrats on the spot. And two, because there is now a very mobilized political constituency that cares about the issue and has a different view from either the Republican or the Democratic party establishment. And they are becoming increasingly restive. They want to be vocal on this issue.

I think the progressive grassroots want to make it kind of a litmus test for Democratic candidates, because they see this is part of intersectional relationships with other issues, like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, and non-intervention in general in places like Venezuela.

They see this as part and parcel of this kind of ideological approach. And they're going to make it an issue. So it's going to come from both sides. It's going to come from the progressive grassroots, and it's going to come from the Republican establishment.

One thing I've heard from more than one Democratic campaign is that, for the most part, they don't expect foreign policy to be an issue in 2020, except on this issue of Israel and the Palestinians. They're anticipating that it will come up.

Alexia Underwood

Which 2020 candidate who has announced so far do you think seems to have the best handle on this issue — meaning, who's the least likely to have the "blind spot" that you mention?

Khaled Elgindy

So far, the person who has the most clearly articulated view on this issue has to be Bernie Sanders. Since 2016, he's been articulating a series of positions on Israel-Palestine. He's not just responding. You know, a lot of times campaigns or candidates will have to stake out a position because they're asked, "Well, where do you stand on this?" — on the US decision to move their embassy to Jerusalem, or the Iran deal, or whatever.

I think most of the other candidates are probably still a little bit gun-shy; none of them have, to my knowledge, anything like Sanders's fleshed-out set of positions on this issue. I think what we've mostly heard is falling back on "We want a two-state solution to the conflict," etc. But I don't think they've really been pressed on it.

But Sanders has staked out, proactively, a fairly coherent set of policies, and what was pretty remarkable was that he did it in 2016, in Brooklyn, when he went into the debate

with Hillary Clinton. I think he recognized that this is no longer a political liability — and that there's actually a political benefit that can be gained from taking on this issue.