



Review: The Middle East Peace Process in Wor(l)d Politics

Reviewed Work(s): *Cosmopolitan Mediation? Conflict Resolution and the Oslo Accords* by Deiniol Jones; *Compromising Palestine: A Guide to Final Status Negotiations* by Aharon Klieman

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Source: *The Arab Studies Journal*, Vol. 8/9, No. 2/1 (Fall 2000/Spring 2001), pp. 196-201

Published by: Arab Studies Institute

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27933796>

Accessed: 11-02-2019 07:20 UTC

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The Middle East Peace Process in Wor(l)d Politics

Reviewed by Pinar Bilgin

***Cosmopolitan Mediation?
Conflict Resolution and the Oslo Accords***

Deiniol Jones
Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999

***Compromising Palestine:
A Guide to Final Status Negotiations***

Aharon Klieman
(New York: Columbia University Press, 2000)

The two books under review here share an interest in the future of the Middle East peace process. Indeed, both Deiniol Jones and Aharon Klieman seek to point out ways in which a lasting peace could be developed in Israel/Palestine. In doing this, Klieman focuses on the final status negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, seeking to give some direction to the efforts to bring an end to this age-old conflict. Jones, on the other hand, presents a critique of the role mediation has played in trying to resolve the conflict. Although the overall purpose of his study is one of developing a Critical Theory-guided approach to mediation in international conflicts, his analysis of the Oslo process provides invaluable insight into peacemaking in Israel/Palestine.

The parallels between the two books stop there, in the sense that that the two authors differ radically when it comes to suggesting solutions. Whereas Klieman seeks to further the negotiation process that began at Oslo by pointing to the outcomes that may result if the issue of final status is not addressed sooner rather than later,

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Jones takes a step back and questions the role meditation has played in the set-up of the Oslo process. He maintains that if the Middle East peace process is currently at an impasse, this is not necessarily because of a lack of willingness on both sides to discuss sensitive issues such as that of partition, but because of the way negotiations were set up at Oslo. It could be argued that this difference in the solutions is rooted in the different philosophical grounds on which the two authors build their respective arguments, which, in turn, colors their conception of what “peace” in Israel/Palestine should look like. In order to further clarify this argument, a brief summary of the two books is in order.

In *Compromising Palestine*, Klieman’s starting point is that the Middle East peace process may be far from perfect, but it is what we have got and that policymakers’ efforts should be directed toward its full implementation by way of openly discussing heretofore unaddressed issues. This assumption is also in line with Rami Khouri’s argument that the

Oslo process, though conceptually flawed and erratically implemented, remains a valid framework for peacemaking. It was born because it promised, and started, to address the mutual concerns of both sides. It has persisted through the many obstacles that could have halted it because it continues to deliver both sides incremental, meaningful gains, even though the larger issues of refugees, borders, Jerusalem and others remain unaddressed.¹

Indeed, Klieman maintains that “under prevailing conditions some model for reapportioning and repartitioning Palestine presents a historical and diplomatic inevitability.” (4) Accordingly, the parties should start thinking deeply about the thorny issue of the final status of Israel/Palestine which was left by the Oslo negotiators to be discussed in the future. Although it may well be that it was the so-called “constructive ambiguity” of the Oslo Accords on this and other sensitive issues that enabled an agreement at the time, this ambiguity no longer seems to serve the cause of peace. This is why, argues Klieman, both sides should concentrate their efforts on clarifying their respective positions by focusing on “peace constructs” and “peace maps” based upon territorial compromise that meets minimal Israeli and Palestinian objectives, and intensifying their efforts on “moving more quickly from resolving misunderstandings to ratifying understandings and then to carrying them out to the letter of the agreement.” (3)

Klieman’s study in itself constitutes a step taken in this direction. In just over 240 pages, Klieman presents a strong case for “partition plus” defined as “the notion of political distinctiveness moderated by, and combined with, degrees of integration and coordination.”(5) This solution entails a “mixed relationship” on issues of economic and security cooperation, Jerusalem, and safe passage. It is a “mixed relationship” in the sense that Palestinians and Israelis will have their own separate political entities whilst creating, maintaining and strengthening relationships of interdependence amongst themselves and with Jordan. “Separating . . . but separating together,” in Klieman’s words. (23)

Klieman is no optimist when writing about the prospects for peacemaking in Israel/Palestine. On the contrary, by choosing to focus on such thorny issues and exploring their practicalities, he points to the complexities awaiting the negotiators whilst stressing that partition “may well be the *only way out* for Israelis and Palestinians.” (5, emphasis in original) Klieman also suggests that similar studies need to be undertaken by Palestinians in order that the two sides have a better grasp of each other’s understanding of the “limits of the possible.”

What appears to have led Klieman to seek to emphasise the difficulties involved in reaching an agreement about final status is an assumption that seems to guide many supporters of the Peace Process that Palestinians and Israelis are, in Oslo architect Yossi Beilin’s words, “speaking more or less about the same solution. Despite using other words, other symbols, we know more or less what the solution will be.” (5-6) Arguing against such assumptions, Klieman emphasizes the multiplicity of meanings attached to the word “partition” and maintains that the two sides are, in fact, “miles apart.” His main point is that it is time both sides addressed these problems head on and start drawing lines on a map—what partition will mean in practical terms however unjust it may seem to some.

Klieman’s critique of the use of “constructive ambiguity” is mainly based on his conviction that it no longer serves the purposes of peace. From Deiniol Jones’ perspective, on the other hand, it was this very use of ambiguous language that lay at the roots of the current impasse in Palestinian-Israeli peace-making. Indeed, Jones is very critical of the role played by Norwegian facilitators. Arguing against those who hailed the “emancipatory” nature of Norwegian facilitation, Jones submits that the use of mediation was inadequate in that it failed to create the conditions for “stable peace.”² This, Jones argues, could only be done through the adoption of an alternative approach to mediation, one guided by Critical Theory.³

In *Cosmopolitan Meditation*, Jones establishes the need for a critical approach to mediation by pointing to the centrality of mediation in international politics. He then moves on to reveal the inadequacy of existing approaches to mediation: the “geostrategic”/“power-political” approach used mostly by the great powers and the “facilitative”/“problem-solving” approach which is preferred by smaller states as well as non-state actors. A major difference between the two is that whereas the former interprets conflicts from a “power-political” perspective, and seeks their resolution for the purposes of maintaining stability in the international system, the latter endeavours to help the parties generate their own self-sustaining solutions. Ultimately, the facilitative approach, too, recognizes the need to maintain international stability. However, the proponents of the facilitative approach also believe that solutions would be much more stable if they are not imposed from outside but are generated by the parties themselves with the help of a “neutral” external actor who simply seeks to enhance the pie.

During the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union interpreted Middle Eastern issues within the context of their own security needs and interests, not that of regional actors. To the extent that their needs and interests coincided with that of regional actors, their efforts seemed successful, as was the case with U.S.

mediation between Israel and Egypt during the 1970s. Indeed, it could be argued that it was U.S. “partiality” that rendered its mediation successful; for, Egyptian president Anwar Sadat firmly believed that only the power-political approach of the United States could bring Israel to the negotiation table and later ensure the implementation of agreements reached.⁴

The proponents of the facilitative approach argue that the “strategic rationality” that is at the root of Camp David agreements could only achieve “negative peace”⁵ defined as the absence of armed conflict between the two sides. The problem with “negative peace” is that it does not tend to be stable, for it does not involve the creation of conditions that would enable the parties to realise their full potential as human beings. For peace to be stable, argue the proponents of facilitation, it has to be reached by the two sides through negotiations guided by “contextual rationality,” which itself is a product of the process of negotiation.

“Stable peace” was also what the Norwegian mediators of the Oslo process sought to establish in Israel/Palestine. Although they were aware of the fact that not all problems could be addressed and solved at the same time, they believed that the framework established at Oslo would be self-sustaining. In an attempt to help the parties to establish a working relationship, the Norwegian facilitators encouraged the parties to seek refuge in “studied silence.” Their hope was that a more opportune moment will emerge in time to discuss the rather thorny issues if only a working relationship could be established.

Klieman’s misgivings about Oslo are not restricted to the use of “constructive ambiguity.” He also has some reservations about the very institution of mediation in Middle Eastern conflicts. For, he believes that

we Middle Easterners do in fact understand each other and the rules of Middle Eastern negotiating behaviour, certainly far better than Europeans or Americans. The job of outsiders ought to be to concentrate on getting Israelis, Arabs and the Palestinians into the same room and to provide positive reinforcement when called upon to do so. I am therefore inclined to take a dimmer view of external mediatory offers as interference: well-intentioned for the most part, but interference nevertheless. (17)

This argument is in contrast to Jones, who maintains that when there is a power imbalance between the two parties (as is the case with Palestinians and Israelis, whose negotiations have been described by Edward Said as a dialogue between “subordinate and dominant partners”⁶) the role of the mediator is to seek to establish some semblance of a balance.

The crux of Jones’ argument is that the Oslo Accords and the Norwegian facilitation “*reproduce* rather than overcome the structures of inequality and domination” the reason being that “too many claims of Palestinian nationalism were marginalised” during the process, which has been dominated by Israel’s security concerns. (5-6) The broader point here is that any mediation effort that does not seek to redress the power imbalance between the parties would be bound to perpetuate it. Jones maintains that that this was what the Norwegian mediators did at Oslo. They

perpetuated the existing structural power imbalance between Israelis and Palestinians by failing to act to address it, and even more importantly, by seeking to bypass it through resorting to *word politics*.

The role “word politics” played in the Middle East peace process could be analysed at two different levels. At a basic level, “word politics” mattered because Palestinian negotiators were at a disadvantage when it came to the use of English, which was the language in which the Oslo document was written. When coupled with the Palestinian team’s relative lack of legal expertise, this meant that the power imbalance between Israelis and Palestinians were further compounded by their inequality in terms of linguistic power at the negotiating table.⁷ Although it could be argued that ensuring the legal and linguistic competence of their negotiators was the Palestinian side’s own responsibility, it could also be suggested, as Jones does, that the mediator should have recognised this imbalance and sought to redress it.

At another level, the mediators themselves employed “word politics.” As Jones puts it:

The use of language in the Process and Accords covers up and legitimises what would otherwise be seen as naked, if not brutal strategic action. In their normative appeals, the Oslo Process and Accords free ride on the commitments to truth, rationality, and justice embedded in cosmopolitan ethics. (6)

More specifically, the Oslo Accords served to marginalize the demands of the Palestinian side in three ways. First, the overriding emphasis on Israel’s security needs, which has characterised the language of all negotiations conducted since Oslo, has meant the marginalization of the concerns of Palestinians. Second, argues Jones, references to UN Resolution 242 were all rather vague, which further compounded the already existing gap between its alternative interpretations. Likewise, the concept of an “interim period” was couched in ambiguous terms thereby delaying negotiations on final status. (138) Jones is particularly critical of the ambiguity surrounding final status considering the fact that the mediator was not a superpower that could ensure that the parties remained true to the letter as well as the spirit of the agreement, but was the group of Norwegian facilitators that lacked the political clout to prevent successive Israeli governments from exploiting its adversary’s weakness.

An alternative, Critical Theory-guided (“cosmopolitan”) approach to mediation, suggests Jones, would have sought to identify and seek to redress such imbalance on the ground in Israel/Palestine as well as on linguistic grounds at the negotiating table. Such an approach would have involved overcoming obstacles to dialogue through strengthening civil society as the European Union has sought to do since 1993. The assumption behind this is that “dialogue arises out of necessity and that where power operates to shape a political context dialogue is rendered redundant.” (94) By way of strengthening forces of democracy, argues Jones,

the intervening power can hope to alter the future course of negotiations without becoming “facilitative.” A critical or cosmopolitan approach seeks to strengthen the

weaker forces of democracy in order that stronger or more intransigent parties will gain more of an incentive to talk. (94-95)

What is significant for the purposes of this essay is the broader theoretical point Jones makes, which is that “stable peace” could only be achieved through the adoption of a critical theory of international mediation that would furnish the mediator with the tools to criticise the process with resort to “normative political principles derived from a cosmopolitan ethic” whilst remaining firmly grounded in the context introduced by particular circumstances. (7)

Both Klieman and Jones share an interest in the prospects of peace-making in Israel/Palestine and present contending perspectives on future of the peace process. Klieman’s book in particular offers invaluable insight into the complex issues involved in Arab-Israeli peace-making and seeks to move toward a solution by thinking about heretofore unaddressed issues. Furthermore, both authors argue that in order for ‘stable peace’ to be established, the structural roots of the conflict between the two parties should be sought and removed. However, the roots of the conflict go much deeper than Klieman seems to recognize. It could be argued that Kleiman’s study is a fine example of a “problem-solving” approach to the issue of peace-making in Israel/Palestine. Jones’ book, on the other hand, seeks to show the inadequacy of such (problem-solving) approaches and presents a critical one instead. Building upon Jones’ analysis, it could be argued that it is not only in “world politics” but also in “word politics” that the structural roots of the current impasse in Israel/Palestine should be sought. Hence the need for a critical approach, the theoretical framework for which is provided in Jones’ study.

ENDNOTES

¹ Rami G. Khouri, “The Arab-Israeli Peace Process: Lessons from the Five Years Since Oslo,” *Security Dialogue* 29:3 (1998), p. 344.

² Kenneth Boulding, *Stable Peace* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978).

³ The reference is to Frankfurt School Critical Theory. Jones focuses on the works of Jürgen Habermas, David Held, and Andrew Linklater in his analysis.

⁴ See Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, *Secret Channels: The Inside Story of Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations* (London: Harper Collins, 1996).

⁵ See, for example, David P. Barash, ed., *Approaches to Peace: A Reader in Peace Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), esp. pp. 61-127.

⁶ Edward W. Said, *Peace and Its Discontents: Gaza-Jericho, 1993-1995* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 37.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 182. ♦