

Fifty years on from the Six Day War, the prospects for Middle East peace remain dim

Written by Tony Walker, Adjunct Professor, School of Communications, La Trobe University



US President Donald Trump talks to Arab leaders in Riyadh on his recent tour of the Middle East. Reuters/Jonathan Ernst

The world will note this Monday, June 5, as one of the more significant dates on the international calendar. This was the day 50 years ago when Israel launched a preemptive strike against its Arab foes. In less than a week, it overwhelmed the armies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria.

That decisive military engagement became known as the [Six Day War](#) .

A half century later the world, and, more specifically, Israelis and Palestinians, are living with the war's consequences - none more so than the Palestinians who find themselves entering a sixth decade under occupation with all that implies.

Since 1967, repeated efforts have been made to bring peace to a troubled region that lies between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean.

Leaving aside the [Camp David Accords](#) of 1978 and the subsequent peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, under which the Sinai was returned to Egyptian control, numerous initiatives have failed dating from the Carter administration. These so-called peace plans are like rusting tanks and artillery pieces left behind in the desert.

Each new US presidency brings with it promise of a fresh start, a new beginning, a resolution of the world's most vexed and long-running conflict.

President Donald Trump's tenure is no exception.

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In Trumpian art-of-the-deal language, the president has described a prospective peace settlement as the ["ultimate deal"](#).

So, the question at the beginning of a new administration, is what are prospects for progress on this occasion, what might be different this time, and why should we have any more confidence in a successful outcome now?

Why should we believe Trump will do any better than his predecessors?

The short answer is that prospects for genuine progress in the Middle East remain very slim, and indeed are barely perceptible.

Circumstances could hardly be less propitious.

A nationalistic Israeli government would almost certainly fall apart on issues of territorial compromise and sovereignty over Jerusalem if negotiations proceeded. A weak Palestinian leadership of questionable legitimacy is hardly in a position to make the sort of concessions that would be needed to advance the process.

A Palestinian schism weighs heavily.

Palestinians are deeply divided between the West Bank under the nominal control of the secular Fatah mainstream, and the Gaza Strip ruled by the Islamist Hamas. The two are adversaries, and remain far apart on even the most basic question of an acceptance of Israel's right to exist within secure pre-1967 war boundaries.

The United States and its allies, including Australia, regard Hamas as a terrorist organisation.

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However, if we are to take a glass-half-full perspective, we could identify several factors that just might contribute to progress.

A new and unorthodox presidency holds a faint promise. Trump appears to have identified the Arab-Israel dispute as an early priority.

The fact that he chose to visit Saudi Arabia, Israel and Palestine on his first trip abroad as president signals an intention to devote resources to exploring possibilities.

Then there is Iran with its long shadow over the entire Middle East.

It might be cliché, but it also holds truth in a part of the world where alliances are fragile, and one's friends today might be one's enemies tomorrow.

In Arab parlance: the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

On his visit to Saudi Arabia last month, Trump appeared to have had a grand Middle East bargain in mind that would include an end to an Arab boycott of Israel in the face of a common enemy – Iran.

“Until the Iranian regime is willing to be a partner for peace, all nations of conscience must work together to isolate Iran, deny it funding for terrorism, and pray for the day when the Iranian people have the just and righteous government they deserve,” he said.

Trump backed up those words with \$110 billion worth of arms sales to Saudi Arabia.

Pledges made and statements uttered on Trump's brief visit to the Kingdom signalled an important shift in American policy from the Obama years.

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In effect, the [US is resetting its Middle East policy](#) to align itself with the Conservative Sunni Arabs against Iran, which is clearly identified as a common enemy.

Where this leads is difficult to predict, but it might be observed that Trump made his decisive intervention in Middle East politics in the same week Iran re-elected a moderate leader whose platform included insistence that Iranian interests lay in a continued opening to the West.

President Hassan Rouhani won an overwhelming victory on the first ballot against a conservative opponent. His re-election has been welcomed in Europe whose leaders are finding themselves increasingly at odds with the White House.

What is not clear in the wake of Trump's visit to the region is whether his public statements in Saudi Arabia, and in Israel and Palestine, are part of any sort of overarching strategy, or whether he was engaging in what might be described as a reconnaissance mission.

But a so-called "ultimate deal" between the Arabs and Israel has been on the table for 15 years since the [Arab Peace Initiative](#) was unveiled at an Arab League summit in Beirut in 2002.

In a nutshell, Arab states would recognise Israel in return for its withdrawal from land occupied in the 1967 war, including East Jerusalem. This would become the capital of a Palestinian state.

The Arab Peace Initiative has been reaffirmed on two separate occasions at Arab League summits, most recently in Amman in March this year.

Needless to say, Israel has evinced little enthusiasm for this proposal, but it does have the virtue of providing a possible region-wide framework for an "ultimate deal" that would end a state of war between Israel and the Arabs at a moment when the Middle East is in turmoil.

Where Trump and his advisers could be on the right track lies in the possibility of drawing Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Egypt and Jordan into a process that just might provide the basis for the

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beginning of discussions.

Trump left the region without offering any specific ideas for a way forward, so it remains to be seen whether he and his Middle East negotiators are able to nurture something out of barren soil.

On the 50th anniversary of the Six Day War chances of a breakthrough remain dim, but in a region at war with itself, it is wise to never say never.

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