

US can no longer be counted on to end Israel-Palestinian conflict

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

As Palestinians [counted the dead](#) after another explosion of violence in a conflict that has consumed the Middle East for generations, the world is being obliged to take account of a new reality.

[US indifference to force](#) used by Israel to put down demonstrations on its border fence with Gaza – on top of the [move of its embassy](#) to Jerusalem – means Washington has yielded a traditional honest broker role in an age-old conflict.

Whether that role can be restored is problematical, but not out of the question. In the Middle East geopolitics, nothing is set in stone.

While successive US administrations have been largely supportive of Israel, this support has been conditional on legitimate Israeli attempts to achieve an accord with a Palestinian population dispossessed by Israel's war of independence in 1948.

That fundamental and conditional principle of US statecraft is now in question. No US administration going back to Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower has been as indulgent towards the state of Israel as this latest administration.

President Donald Trump has delivered in spades what Israel and its US supporters have demanded. This includes a [withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal](#) and now the relocation of the US embassy.

None of this will lessen Middle East tensions. To the contrary.

Backsliding peace process

US backing for Israel in its various wars with the Arabs, including in 1967 and 1973, has been extended on the basis that once the dust settled, Israel would seek an accommodation with its antagonists.

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This became known as the “peace process”, an ephemeral concept that has come and gone depending on circumstances on the ground, and the willingness of the US to invest capital in that process.

That is what happened after the 1973 Yom Kippur War when then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger brokered a peace deal between Israel and its arch foe, Egypt.

Attempts since then to build on the [Camp David Accords](#) have moved forward in fits and starts with limited success through moments of promise such as the [1993 handshake on the White House lawn](#) between Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

Read more: [*'I can live with either one': Palestine, Israel and the two-state solution*](#)

That process was cut down by an Israeli assassin's bullet in 1995, when Rabin was executed during an election campaign rally. Rabin paid the price for his engagement in an attempt to reach an understanding with the Palestinians leading to a lasting peace.

The [Oslo Accords](#) between Israeli and Palestinian interlocutors that paved the way for the possibility of an “historic compromise” effectively died that day.

In the years since - now more than two decades - the so-called peace process has shifted backwards even as Israel continued its settlement construction in territory occupied in 1967, including parts of East Jerusalem.

What is unarguable is that the Jewish state under successive nationalist governments [has embarked on a process of creeping annexation](#)

of territory under its control.

Likud governments led by Benjamin Netanyahu have been, for the most part, resistant to making the sort of concessions to the Palestinians that would enable real progress towards a peace settlement.

Read more: [Stop telling Palestinians to be 'resilient' – the rest of the world has failed them](#)

It's also the case the Palestinians have been either unwilling – or unable – to engage constructively in a full-blown peace process, even if Israel was well-motivated.

A decrepit Palestinian leadership well past its use-by date is hardly in a position to negotiate, even if Palestinians were not split in half between the Islamist Hamas in control in Gaza and the Fatah mainstream in the West Bank.

[The absence of presidential elections](#) for more than a decade robs the traditional Palestinian leadership of legitimacy.

This is the reality. Israel has a leadership that is stealthily extending its grip on territories occupied in 1967. This is now at the point where it will become even more difficult to achieve territorial compromise under a so-called “land for peace” formula.

America's shifting role

Writing for [Foreign Affairs](#), Middle East analyst Steven Cooke makes good points in responding to the arguments of those supporting the move of the US embassy to Jerusalem as a potential game-changer in Middle East peace efforts.

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The president's decision was devoid of any recognition of the Israeli political context in which there is little, if any, interest in a two-state solution and he grossly miscalculated the likely Palestinian response. Both of these elements have conspired to make negotiations even less likely than before.

Even if there was a hint of a genuine peace initiative resuming, nothing will be achieved without a US honest broker in such a process.

Absent serious talks or even a US policy to address issues like settlements, borders, refugees, and the humanitarian suffering in the Gaza Strip, the opening of the new embassy only legitimates – even rewards – Israel's hardline approach to conflict. The logical conclusion of this approach is the annexation of territory that Palestinians hoped would be part of their state.

What will likely be disappointing to the Palestinian leadership is a relatively muted international reaction to events in Gaza. Statements such as those from UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres [condemning the violence](#) have been pro forma.

Read more: [***A rare American rebuke for Israel***](#)

Washington's [response was summed up by UN ambassador Nikki Haley](#), who criticised what she characterised as the double standards applied by other nations to Israel. "Who among us would accept this type of activity on your border?" she asked, adding no country acted "with more restraint than Israel".

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the Trump administration has effectively written Israel and its nationalist leadership a blank cheque to deal with the Palestinians as they see fit, including a continuing process of annexation.

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