

Reflections on the Mideast Peace Talks

RELEASE IN FULL

By Louise Diamond, Ph.D.

As the direct Israeli-Palestinian peace talks in Washington progress, the U.S. mediation team will need to be attentive to several invisible dynamics. Even as the parties are talking about specifics – boundary lines, water rights, and such – there's more going on under the surface that, if ignored, can derail a successful conclusion.

The first concerns leadership. Everyone already knows the basic elements of a two-state solution. What we have never seen is the personal and political will and courage, on all sides and at the same time, to make the deal. There are bitter pills and unfulfilled dreams for both parties in this settlement, and pockets of resistance to it – sometimes violent – in both populations.

To manage that successfully, leaders need to articulate the immense gains as well, a positive future vision so compelling as to make the sacrifices worthwhile. This vision needs to be framed from a big-picture perspective: a just, viable, and sustainable peace between Israeli and Palestinian states and peoples that also brings regional security, stability, and prosperity. Every concrete item under discussion should be referred to that goal: how will agreeing or not agreeing on any one matter contribute to that ultimate outcome?

In addition to a shared vision, the other factor essential to true peace is a commitment to end, and eventually heal, the acute pain and suffering. In deep-rooted conflicts such as this, the parties develop recognizable patterns intended to help ameliorate the pain. They will emphasize accusing each other of being the roadblock; setting up the other side to fail so it can be blamed for lack of progress; or seeking to convince outsiders that the other side is at fault so as to avoid taking responsibility for its own actions.

Another pattern involves competing victimhoods. While each side has indeed been the target of un-rightable wrongs, emphasizing the role of victim might seem easier than seeing how one's own behavior has contributed to a mutual dance of spiraling enmity. Or each party may insist that its suffering is bigger, stronger, or more worthy of sympathy than that of the other side, as if there were a yardstick for suffering.

What is true, here and in all violent conflicts, is that the loss of life, homes, loved ones, hope, land, and way of life in each individual's experience is immeasurable. There is deep trauma on both sides. Each side has inflicted harm on the other, and has experienced its own pain within the context of its history and collective narrative. Clearly the road to peace will need to involve the building of trust, the healing of wounds, and ultimately, reconciliation.

These current peace talks are an opportunity for the parties to stop the cycle of violence before it escalates even further. Each missed opportunity only makes the healing journey that much harder, and with decades of broken bodies, agreements, and dreams, that road is already difficult enough.

So, the combination of a compelling vision and a commitment to stop the violence and start the healing are the true components of a successful peace process, regardless of any specific details of an agreement. Necessary, but not sufficient, I would suggest. The third element has to do with transforming the essential story of the relationship.

Jews and Arabs have been in a family relationship from biblical times. Every family fights occasionally, but this feud has infected the whole world with its bitter and deadly consequences. The only way to get a viable peace is to change the core story of this relationship from the rabid 'us' against 'them' narrative to one about 'we.'

'We' are in this relationship together and always will be, and can choose to take each other down or raise each other up. 'We' are more than just ourselves; 'we' are also our neighbors in a larger regional story. 'We' are our ancestors through whose courage and anguish we came to this point, and our grandchildren who will bear the consequences of what we create. Forging a partnership of 'we' can and must be the lynchpin of this peace journey.

There is a difference between signing a peace accord and securing a lasting peace. The U.S. mediation team will be concerned primarily with the former in this current round of talks. I sincerely hope they will also keep in mind the latter, and the invisible dynamics at play in the process. Secretary Clinton speaks of moving from a multi-polar world to a multi-partner world. These peace talks are a unique opportunity on that road.