



PERSPECTIVES

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Constructive Diplomacy vs. Self-Deceptive Diplomacy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: When does diplomacy serve to build bridges and when does it just promote self-deception?

Diplomacy can be either constructive or self-deceptive. Self-deception occurs when the more democratic party succumbs to the illusion that hostility is rooted in historical mistrust and lack of communication rather than in diametrically divergent goals and values.

Examples of constructive, bridge-building diplomacy include the Reagan-Gorbachev summits, Richard Nixon's visit to China, and Konrad Adenauer's meetings with David Ben-Gurion. Ronald Reagan, a staunch anti-Communist, visited Moscow when it was clear that the Soviet Union no longer sought to export the Communist revolution around the world. Nixon sought out Chinese friendship in order to strengthen America's position versus their common Soviet foe. Adenauer visited Israel because the Federal Republic of Germany wished to atone for the Holocaust.

Examples of diplomacy that served only to promote self-deception include the Anglo-French appeasement of Nazi Germany, the Oslo "peace process," and Barack Obama's nuclear agreement with Iran. In each case, the democratic side ignored the reality that the other party was pursuing an agenda that was not only hostile to its existential interests, but entrenched in a fundamentally anti-democratic worldview and value system.

During the 1930s, many seductive arguments were made in the Anglo-French press about the importance of repairing past injustices inflicted by the Western powers on the German people. But the resulting diplomacy, which was guided by moral values and purported political intelligence, made the catastrophic

error of believing concessions to Germany could constructively be made to a brutal dictator who herded opponents into concentration camps and exalted militarism and violence.

The Anglo-British leaders hoped concessions would tame Hitler, who, in *Mein Kampf* and during his years in power, had made the goals of his movement and ideology crystal clear. Likewise, during the 1990s, Israel's leadership expected Yasser Arafat to head a peaceful Palestinian entity. Ignoring a track record of 30 years of treachery and terrorism, Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres hoped the PLO leader would transform himself into the Middle East's Nelson Mandela. They chose to disregard Arafat's incitement in Arabic and pretend his words in English were true. In the process, they ceded the state's historical heartland to an organization which, following the military defeat of its ally Saddam Hussein in Kuwait, might otherwise have landed in the dustbin of history.

This granting of a lifeline to a criminal entity was echoed in the economic, financial, and diplomatic boost President Obama granted the Islamic Republic of Iran. Obama's diplomatic moves gave the ayatollahs the means to pursue aggressive and expansionist plans in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. The expectation that these moves might end the regime's hostile ambitions proved groundless. When a new American administration demanded stronger guarantees that Iran would not pursue its nuclear military objectives, the regime reneged on its commitments and accelerated rather than slowed its nuclear program.

Many friends of Israel are responding to the Iranian threat by pointing optimistically to the friendly gestures being made by Saudi Arabia and other Arab states toward Israel and the Jewish People. Although these gestures are welcome, they should not be taken at face value. Saudi Arabia is historically a leading force to be reckoned with in the Muslim world, but its financial and political clout is steadily waning. A rapidly growing population and the increasing difficulty of providing employment to the younger generation means the kingdom will probably be a less munificent patron in coming years. Once Saudi cash flows, which stretch from Dakar to Jakarta, start to dry up, Riyadh will no longer hold the key to better Israeli relations with Muslim governments around the world.

The recent Iranian drone attack on oil refinery facilities in Saudi Arabia wreaked havoc on Saudi plans to open its oil conglomerate Aramco to overseas investors. In light of the Iranian military threat and Saudi reliance on American military assistance, Saudi Arabia is at a historical nadir in terms of strength and prestige. This prestige is particularly damaged in the Islamic world by the Saudi government's dependence on President Trump's goodwill, given that Trump is viewed by the Arab street as a deadly enemy of Islam and Muslim

interests. Israel's trumpeting of better ties with Saudi Arabia further erodes the kingdom's credibility in the Arab world.

It is true that nowadays most Arab leaders fear and hate Iran more than they fear and hate Israel. That is why Arab benevolent gestures toward Israel have proliferated in recent years. But these gestures should not be construed as meaning Muslim and particularly Arab Islamic hostility to Zionism has waned.

Nor should it be assumed that if Arab states evolve into liberal democracies, opposition to Israel will evaporate. During the recent presidential elections in Tunisia, the victorious candidate was elected in part due to his anti-Israel rhetoric. Although the proverbial wisdom is true—that Zionism was a useful scapegoat used by Arab dictators to justify their failures and oppress their opponents—the fact is that after 70 years of incessant anti-Israel incitement, the Arab street is more hostile to the Jewish state than are its leaders.

This is why the focus of Israeli-Arab diplomacy in coming years should be cultural and educational exchanges, not meetings with a high value for Arab leaders in terms of PR and US and Israeli economic, military, and technological assistance. The Arab masses need to be exposed to the reality that Jewish Israelis are ordinary human beings who aspire to peace, prosperity, and freedom for the whole region.

A powerful step in this direction could be the broadcast of Israeli movies on Arab TV. Another could be translating Israeli authors' works into Arabic and making them accessible at no cost to Arab internet users. Another urgent step is to put information on Judaism and Jewish history up on Youtube and elsewhere on the internet to fight the antisemitic screeds that occupy the top spots when one seeks information on these subjects in Arabic.

This kind of diplomacy would be constructive because it would challenge anti-Jewish hatred in millions of hearts and minds. High-profile meetings that earn positive coverage in the West but provoke disdain or ignominious silence in the Arab world run the risk of being an exercise in self-deception.

Ideally, highly visible international gestures and more discreet pro-Jewish steps in the Muslim world will take place at the same time. The Jewish world should welcome every step made in good faith, no matter how small. But good faith is the crucial qualifier. The context and motivations of the actors involved need to be scrutinized in order to avoid self-deception now and bitter disappointment in the future.

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