

# MAKING PEACE FROM THE OUTSIDE-IN OR THE INSIDE-OUT

Janice Gross Stein

In this roundtable feature, Janice Gross Stein reviews Galen Jackson's book, "A Lost Peace," and argues that outside powers can hinder or support efforts toward peace but cannot impose it.

As the most violent war yet in the long history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict rages, a war especially horrific in its consequences for civilian populations, thinking inevitably jumps to “the day after” the fighting stops. Front and center is the opportunity, this time, to make peace between two states, the state of Israel and the state of Palestine, living side by side. This, sadly, is not a new idea. It has a long and frustrating lineage.

Despite this long history of failure, people are uncommonly willing to step forward with ideas on how to make peace. Beyond the obvious professional diplomats and international lawyers, peace cartographers are almost a cottage industry. Historians, political scientists, journalists, scientists, and foundations, not to mention politicians, regularly draw virtual maps of how peace can be forged. They do so even when the conflicts are regional, intractable, violent, and enduring. These peace maps are well-drawn, logical, comprehensive, and compelling. Why then do they succeed so rarely? Why do so few leaders of governments and oppositions follow the directions to get to peace?

One word best simplifies the complex forces at work: context. Context that is shaped by historical memory and deep grievance. Louise Arbour, the chief prosecutor of war crimes for the International Criminal Tribunals for Rwanda and for the former Yugoslavia, famously remarked that the Middle East suffers from too much history and too little geography.<sup>1</sup> In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, both peoples make historical claims to the same small piece of territory, they both reach back into history for validation but start the historical clock at different times, and their historical narratives each exclude the other except as an aggressor. Each sees itself as a victim of self-interested imperial powers who were remarkably ignorant when they came to the region. And each has a deeply ingrained confidence — a confidence that is invisible to outsiders who do not speak the local languages — that they will be there long after the outsiders lose interest and go home. Finally, each community includes religious voices that regard their right to all of the land as divinely inspired. It should be no surprise that peace has eluded Israel and Palestine for well over a hundred years.

Galen Jackson approaches the Arab-Israeli dispute with little attention to the historical memories that

have etched the politics of the region. That is perhaps a function of the limited historical period that is the focus of his book.<sup>2</sup> He looks only at 13 years, a small and very particular period in the long-enduring conflict when Arab states were deeply involved in the wake of the war in 1967 and replaced Palestinians as the principal focus of attention. Even then, Amman and Damascus are largely ignored in this story. Cairo does better, but this is largely a history of the Arab-Israeli dispute told from the perspective of Washington that was primarily focused on Moscow rather than on the Middle East. Not for the first time and not for the last, an outside great power saw the Middle East as an arena of competition with another great power.

## A Cold War Story

The central argument of this meticulously researched book is that the United States “lost” the opportunity to make peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors largely because of Washington’s determination to oust the Soviet Union, once and for all, from the Middle East. Henry Kissinger, first the national security adviser and then secretary of state for eight of these 13 years, was focused on disrupting the alliance between the Soviet Union and Egypt and Syria and expelling Moscow from the region. That grand strategy framed everything he did during those critical years. The secretary of state, Jackson shows, ignored clearly expressed signals from Soviet leaders, especially from 1973 on, that they were willing to agree to terms to resolve the Arab-Israeli dispute that were acceptable to the United States.

Jackson mines newly released historical documents, particularly from the United States, and provides compelling evidence that challenges the conventional wisdom that the Soviet Union was determined to prevent a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Moscow was allegedly motivated by ideological reasons and by the opportunities that an ongoing conflict provided to strengthen its alliances and deepen its presence in the region. Jackson asks the counterfactual question: Would it have not made more sense for the superpowers to have collaborated to find a solution to a conflict that conceivably could escalate

<sup>1</sup> Personal conversation, June 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Galen Jackson, *A Lost Peace: Great Power Politics and the Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1967-79*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023.

to a major war between them? Moscow and Washington had an obvious interest in not being dragged into war by their partners in the region. And, if they did share an interest in avoiding war, why didn't they — as the Nixon administration suggested they would — subordinate special interests in order to resolve the conflict and strengthen détente that was so important to both governments? That is the defining puzzle that Jackson tries to solve in this carefully researched book.

The story leaps off the page in this lively and well-written story. It should be no surprise to regular readers of American history that both President Richard Nixon and Kissinger use extraordinarily vivid language in their private memos and conversations. Nor is their frustration with Israel and the colorful language they use to describe its leaders surprising. What does become clear in Jackson's careful reconstruction of these years is that Nixon was far more interested in a comprehensive settlement than was Kissinger. It is surprising to read how deeply committed the president was, in theory, to a settlement but how little he was willing to do in practice. It is almost as if these conversations were a private outlet for Nixon that then absolved him of the need to do very much about pushing a settlement forward in practice.

Jackson establishes clearly that, from 1971 on, Moscow wanted to work with Washington on a comprehensive agreement. That interest in stabilizing the conflict deepened after Egypt and Syria launched a war in 1973 in a deliberate and politically sophisticated attempt to destabilize the *status quo* and force open a pathway to a political settlement. It would have been helpful if Jackson's account had made more space for the deep frustration in Cairo that was ignited by Moscow's repeated refusals to supply the advanced weaponry that President Anwar Sadat requested. That refusal is consistent with the broader argument that Jackson makes about Soviet restraint, a lesson learned the hard way after the disastrous role they played in igniting the war in 1967 when Soviet intelligence shared false information with Cairo.

The book also clearly establishes its central argument that Kissinger gave priority to the expulsion of Soviet forces from the Middle East over a comprehensive settlement that would be orchestrated by the two superpowers. Frustration in Cairo made that a possible option. It was not only the refusal to supply advanced weapons but also the condescension that Soviet officers displayed toward their Egyptian counterparts, their belittling of the skills of the Egyptian army, and Soviet officers' frequent stereotyping of their Egyptian counterparts that bordered on racism that damaged the relationship.

Sadat's expulsion of Soviet advisers — designed to satisfy one of Kissinger's core demands in order to draw the United States in — was met with widespread relief and considerable *Schadenfreude* among the officer class in Egypt. Kissinger's objective of expelling the Soviets was far easier to achieve than he had imagined because of the toxic relations between the Soviet and Egyptian officer corps. And Sadat understood well that only the United States had leverage with Israel.

### The Limits of Seeing “Outside-In”

Where Jackson goes beyond the evidence that he so meticulously gathers is in his claim that the United States “lost” the opportunity to make peace. Washington sacrificed peace, Jackson claims, because Kissinger gave priority to the geopolitical objective of expelling the Soviets rather than reducing the risk of war between the two superpowers by imposing a peace on Israel and on its Arab neighbors, including Palestine. The flaws in the logic are not hard to spot.

First, although Kissinger cannot claim credit for the expulsion of the Soviet Union from the region — that was almost exclusively Sadat's doing — the result was to drastically reduce the risk of war between the two nuclear superpowers. Removing Soviet forces resolves part of the puzzle that Jackson poses in the book — that U.S. decision-makers seemingly sacrificed the opportunity to reduce the risk of nuclear war when they privileged the expulsion of Soviet forces at the expense of joint peacemaking. The two objectives — reducing the risk of superpower war and expelling Soviet forces — are mutually reinforcing objectives. If Soviet forces were no longer in Egypt, the probability of an encounter between the forces of the Soviet Union and Israel, which could drag the United States in on behalf of its ally, was now close to zero. There was, in other words, more than one route to reducing the risk of war.

The core claim, then, is that Kissinger forfeited the opportunity to work together with Soviet leaders to impose a peace and that Arabs, Israelis, and Palestinians have paid the price ever since. That claim can only be tested against the consuming efforts of subsequent U.S. administrations to broker peace agreements. President Jimmy Carter came to office wholly committed to a comprehensive peace and found himself dealing with Sadat, who refused to allow his Arab allies to get in his way of a bilateral peace agreement with Israel that would return the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt. Although the agreement crafted at Camp David between Egypt and Israel was difficult to achieve, it was the easiest to accomplish because of the relatively favorable geography of a large desert

that separated the two former combatants. President Bill Clinton devoted enormous time, attention, and effort to reaching an agreement between Israel and Palestine but was ultimately unable to overcome the challenges that have bedeviled those who have tried to impose or mediate comprehensive agreements for more than a hundred years. It is hard to argue, then, that a U.S.-Soviet effort would have succeeded from 1973 to 1974, had it been tried, when everything else, before and after, has failed.

Perhaps the problem comes in the framing of the book. Jackson suggests that using the Middle East as a window is an effective way to comprehend why Washington and Moscow were unable to cooperate on Arab-Israeli peace and consequently jeopardized détente. To treat the Middle East as a window into the superpower relationship, however, is to ignore a great deal of what is important to the leaders and peoples of the region. It is ultimately to deprive them of agency in the making of agreements that are far more important to them than they are to powers outside the region. The analytic challenge of understanding why peace has not been made has to start in Jerusalem, in Ramallah, in Amman, in Damascus, and in Cairo. Washington and Moscow can hinder, as they have at times, they can help, as they have tried to do at times, but they cannot “lose” a peace that the peoples of the region have not yet found.

That conclusion is again top of mind as Israel and Hamas engage in the most violent episode yet in the enduring Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And once again, peacemaking is being led from the outside — by the United States and by Arab governments who historically have privately shown no great concern either for the suffering of Palestinians or the independence of Palestine. This time, it has fallen to outsiders because both parties to this war — the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the military leadership of Hamas — have no interest in a peace agreement or a two-state solution. That it is the only option does not, however, make it an option that is likely to succeed. Peace cannot be imposed from the outside. It can only be made from the inside. ●

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*Image: White House Photo Office<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>3</sup> For the image, see <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/7268212>.