Review of ‘Negotiating Arab-Israeli Peace’

Negotiating Arab-Israeli Peace: American Leadership in the Middle East edited by Daniel C. Kurtzer and Scott B. Lasensky; published by the U.S. Institute of Peace, 2008, 190 pp., $16 (paperback). Reviewed by Thomas Mitchell, Ph.D.

In 2006, the U.S. Institute of Peace assembled a team of writers to interview participants from Israel, the Arab countries and Palestinians, and the U.S. on the lessons gleaned from American mediation in the Arab-Israeli conflict since the end of the Cold War. The result was published by the USIP Press in early 2008, edited in part by Daniel Kurtzer, a former American ambassador to Israel and a veteran of the peace team from the George H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations.

The book covers three administrations: George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. The first of the three is only briefly discussed, as it was involved in only one initiative. Most of the book deals with Clinton administration peacemaking efforts. Members of the team in addition to the two editors include: William Quandt, the distinguished historian of the peace process who worked on the National Security Council in the Carter administration; Steven Spiegel, an expert on American involvement in the Middle East and the domestic context of U.S. Mideast policy; and Shibley Telhami, a former Israeli Palestinian and now a prominent American scholar on the Middle East conflict. In the spirit of full disclosure I should mention that this reviewer studied under Telhami two decades ago when he still had hair and was relatively unknown nationally.

The book includes: “ten lessons” (pp. 1-73), a number of brief recommendations to the incoming administration (pp. 73-84), a chronology of events in the peace process (pp. 85-122), a number of selected documents relevant to the peace process (pp. 123-77), a bibliography and a list of online sources. It seems to be aimed at the incoming administration.

The first and least controversial lesson is that the U.S. is indispensable to progress in the Middle East peace process. The remaining nine lessons mainly focus on the mistakes of the Clinton administration. They seem to echo the comments made by Aaron Miller in his own recently published book. The most important of these is that policy should be formulated in Washington rather than in the region, by either its clients or its envoys. But that envoys to be effective must have the backing of the president. The authors fault Clinton for being too personally involved in the peace process during 2000 and too accessible to Prime Minister Barak, thereby devaluing his personal intervention at Camp David II.

The authors fault the junior George Bush with not enough active involvement in Middle East diplomacy, particularly after his 2003 Roadmap initiative. They, and this is probably Quandt’s input, advise the president to hit the ground running early in his administration with a speech on the region. They
fault both Clinton and the younger Bush for waiting until too late in their administrations to get seriously involved. Clinton’s parameters are dismissed as ineffective because he noted that they would be withdrawn at the end of his administration. This had the effect of rendering his last-minute effort doomed from the start.

Bush Jr. sponsored the Annapolis conference after many of the regional players had already given up on his administration and decided to wait it out. And then he failed to follow up.

The lessons do not assess blame for the failure of the Oslo process—they are concentrated on American actions rather than those by the parties. But the need to monitor compliance with agreements is noted; the Clinton and Bush administrations are faulted for failing to adequately monitor and punish both the Israelis and Palestinians for non-compliance. Israel failed to comply with the need to remove outpost settlements and the Palestinians for failing to collect arms and to end incitement. This volume, especially coupled with The Much Too Promised Land by Aaron D. Miller, is a good starting place for the next administration, whether it is led by John McCain or Barack Obama.

But in this reviewer’s opinion it fails to adequately take into account the consequences of failure when urging an American initiative in early 2009. The failure of the Oslo process resulted in the center-left “peace camp” Labor and Meretz parties losing half of their strength as compared with 1992. The failure also made Ehud Barak, the new Labor leader, wary of another peacemaking initiative with the Palestinians. While conditions need not be perfect, they should forecast a reasonable expectation of success before the new administration puts its prestige and those of its regional allies at risk. This is where a comparison of the relative chances of success in the Palestinian and Syrian tracks should come into consideration.

Dr. Mitchell is an independent scholar who has authored works on ethnic conflicts and peace processes in comparative perspective.