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Kissinger, Kerry, Kushner: Making and Missing Peace in the Middle East

By Martin Kramer

After Henry Kissinger (class of 1950), the Harvard undergraduate alumnus who has had the most profound effect on the Middle East to date is Jared Kushner (class of 2003), son-in-law of President Donald Trump and architect of the 2020 Abraham Accords. Ponder the irony. Harvard has produced a cavalcade of experts on the Middle East, both practitioners and scholars, with far more knowledge of the region than Kushner's. "I've been studying this now for three years," Kushner said of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict last year. "I've read 25 books on it, I've spoken to every leader in the region, I've spoken to everyone who's been involved in this."¹ That was his primer for his role as broker, first, of Trump's "Vision for Peace" (aka "The Deal of the Century") and later, the breakthrough agreements between Israel and four Arab states.

By conventional standards, Kushner was "winging it." But in policy making, as in real estate, success begins with location. Kushner (and his sidekick, Harvard Law alumnus Avi Berkowitz, class of 2016), ended up in the

White House riding an unpredictable wave in American politics. These twists of fate are not rare; to the contrary, they are par for the course of history. The events that put Kissinger in the Middle Eastern cockpit fifty years ago were no more predictable.

Still, being in the right place is never enough. One has to grasp the meaning of the moment. Jared Kushner understood something fundamental about the Middle East that had eluded the long line of secretaries, deputy secretaries, advisers, envoys, and ambassadors who had preceded him. Having read his 25 books about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he realized that not all Arabs were in its grip.

This was a truth that Barack Obama's secretary of state, John Kerry, hadn't fathomed. Kerry, who had tried his hand in the Middle East right before Kushner, will never live down his 2016 statement, preserved on YouTube and gleefully retweeted thousands of times this past year:

"There will be no separate peace between Israel and the Arab world. I want to

*make that very clear with all of you. I've heard several prominent politicians in Israel sometimes saying, 'Well, the Arab world is in a different place now. We just have to reach out to them. We can work some things with the Arab world, and we'll deal with the Palestinians.' No. No, no, and no."*²

Kushner didn't dismiss the view of Israel's "prominent politicians," but actually put it to the test, and ended up eliciting four "yeses," first from the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, then followed by Sudan and Morocco.

Why did Kerry miss what Kushner saw? Some commentators have portrayed Kerry, and indeed the entire "peace process" establishment, as blinded by bias. But the simpler explanation is a generational difference in the American view of the Arabs. There is an older generation for whom the Arab world appeared driven by ideologies and passions, and a younger generation who see it governed by states and interests.

Kerry, born in 1943, studied political science at Yale when Gamal Abdul Nasser was still riding the crest of pan-Arab sentiment. After 1967, following the emasculation of Nasser, the Arabs seemed to have invested every thought and emotion in the cause of the Palestinians, who violently burst upon the world scene beginning with Black September in 1970.

Kerry belonged to the tail-end of the generation that saw the Arabs through the Palestinian prism. "Is the Israel-Palestine conflict still the key to peace in the whole region?"³ Jimmy Carter was once asked. "Without doubt,"

he answered, "the path to peace in the Middle East goes through Jerusalem." In the estimate of the late Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's national security adviser, "the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the single most combustible and galvanizing issue in the Arab world."⁴ And to be fair, in the past the Israeli-Palestinian conflict *was* both combustible and galvanizing.

But it ceased to be that over time. Thanks to the deal-brokering begun by Kissinger, Israel stopped being regarded in the Arab world as the prime threat to the integrity and stability of Arab states. Peace agreements and American patronage hemmed Israel in. In the place of the Israeli danger, other threats arose: Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which in 1990 briefly erased an Arab state, Kuwait, from the map; and Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran, which energized Shiite minorities against Arab governments.

When Kushner, born in 1981, came to study at Harvard, the Middle East looked entirely different than it had to Kerry at Yale. The Palestinians had lost their privileged position among the Arabs, first by allying with Saddam, and then by entering the Oslo Accords. State interests had washed ideology and passion out of Arab politics.

Of course, Arab states had been making their own calculations for years. Egypt and Jordan had reached peace agreements with Israel, and other Arab states had low-profile ties. But while the trajectory was clear, the old hands still couldn't trace the arc. Kushner, on the other hand, saw the obvious: many Arabs had more important priorities than rallying around the Palestinians.

He also located the tipping point of this sentiment in the Arab Gulf states. For Americans of Kerry's generation, "the Arabs" came from Beirut and Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad. Americans had a foothold in oil-producing Saudi Arabia, but the rest of the littoral of the Arab Gulf was "flyover country" run by the British.

The United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Qatar didn't gain independence until 1971. Even then, they weren't much to write home about. The late Roger Owen, professor of Middle Eastern history at Harvard, evoked the ambience in recalling a visit he made to two of the Emirates in the 1970s: "Abu Dhabi and Sharjah seemed only to come alive when a British Overseas Airways—after 1974, a British Air plane—arrived at dusk, when Land Rovers raced out to meet it, and the passengers disbursed slowly in the evening heat."⁵

By Kushner's time, these same emirates had become the Arab world's glittering "Gold Coast," centers of fabulous wealth wedded to unashamed pragmatism. The old ideologies that had grown like weeds elsewhere in the Arab world never struck root in the sands surrounding the skyscrapers of the Arab Gulf. Here were places that had "come alive" in a spectacular way, and where Arabs broke taboos every day.

Yet even this wouldn't have sufficed to produce a breakthrough. Kushner understood the dread felt by these small Arab states over Iran, and how Israel's sounding of the alarm resonated with them. In the game with Iran, Arab Gulf states and Israel stood near one

another on the scrimmage line, and neither had full confidence in the parade of American quarterbacks, each with a different game plan.

A question facing any future historian will be this: was the "Deal of the Century," with its implicit endorsement of Israeli annexation of parts of the West Bank, designed in advance as a throwaway, to facilitate the Abraham Accords? Whatever the answer, that is precisely the purpose it ultimately served. "We had been talking to both sides for 18 months," said a senior American official, "but the annexation issue created the atmosphere which was conducive for getting a deal."⁶ If it was so designed in advance, then far from being a "dead-on-arrival" plan, it was a strategic feint worthy of a Kissinger. If not, it was a deft last-minute shift of gears.

Whatever the back story, however, the Abraham Accords and their sequels have introduced a new vector in the Middle East. The most creative and dynamic shorelines on the Mediterranean and the Gulf are now linked. They are the counter to the forty-year bond between Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah, which also links the Mediterranean and the Gulf. There is much potential in this fledgling alignment; how much of it will be realized depends on the ingenuity of Israelis and Gulf Arabs alike.

But it also depends on the attitude of the United States. Certainly, it has been hard for the old hands of the Democratic foreign policy establishment to concede that Kushner, wet behind the ears, achieved something that had eluded them. They should get over it.

One doesn't have to believe that Kushner (and Berkowitz) deserve the Nobel Peace Prize, though Harvard emeritus professor Alan Dershowitz has nominated them for one, but one must admit that they got this right.

Remember that Jimmy Carter didn't toss out the Middle East achievements of Richard Nixon and Kissinger, but built them out into a new security architecture for the Middle East. President Biden should consider that precedent and think hard about how to capitalize on the achievements of Trump and Kushner. That need not mean abandoning the quest for a resolution of the Palestinian question. It need not mean locking the door to Iran forever. It does mean nurturing the cooperative spirit of the Abraham Accords. These US-brokered agreements give the United States a strategic edge. In the Middle East, America needs that more than ever.

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Endnotes

- 1 Kushner interview with Sky News Arabia, January 29, 2020.
- 2 "Remarks at the Saban Forum," U.S. Department of State, 4 December 2016, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/12/264824.htm>.
- 3 Nathaniel Gardels, "Jimmy Carter takes on Israel's Apartheid Policies and the Pro-Israeli Lobby in the US," Huffington Post, 12 December 2006. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/jimmy-carter-takes-on-isr_b_36134
- 4 Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Lowered Vision," The New Republic, 7 June 2004. <https://newrepublic.com/article/67609/lowered-vision>
- 5 Roger Owen, *A Life in Middle East Studies* (Fairfax, VA: Tadween Publishing, 2016), p. 117.
- 6 Barak Ravid, "Behind the scenes: How the Israel-UAE deal came together," Axios, 13 August 2020. <https://www.axios.com/how-the-israel-uae-recognition-deal-came-together-d0d45b2e-b2c7-4593-b72a-0ef99ec96233.html>.