

A win-win approach for Israelis, Palestinians is a two-state solution

In diplomacy, the zero-sum game leads to zero achievements.

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A WOMAN shows a \$100 bill she received as aid from Qatar, during a lockdown amid the coronavirus outbreak in Gaza City in September. (photo credit: MOHAMMED SALEM/ REUTERS)

As a retired diplomat, I am often asked what the most valuable trait is for successful diplomacy. My answer is that it is diplomacy that leads international relations to the realm of a win-win situation, and distances them from the “zero-sum game.”

Many people might think that this answer sounds trivial, but human nature actually leans toward trying to win against the other, rather than aspiring to promote one’s interests without doing so at the other party’s expense.

Maybe it is the instincts that remained in the human race since the times when man struggled to survive in the jungle and the choice was between victory or death. However, in the modern world, this inclination does not serve us well. On the contrary. The interesting fact is that in Hebrew, there is a translation to the English term “zero-sum game” but there is no translation to the term “win-win.” Maybe the reason is that the Jewish

people remained in survival mode later into the modern age, and now that we have our own state and the strongest army in the region, we still instinctively feel that our existence is threatened.

The realization that there is no conflict between empathy and assertive advocacy of our interests is necessary for effective diplomacy. The job of a diplomat is to advance beneficial arrangements with friends as well as enemies. Understanding the other side's interests, even when the other side is an enemy, improves our ability to advance our own interests and to create a joint value.

There are joint interests with enemies, as we can learn from the way Israel promotes its relations with Qatar, even though Qatar supports the Muslim Brotherhood movement that is hostile to us. This is based on the understanding that Qatar has leverage on Hamas that we do not have, and neither do our Egyptian partners, and that we need this kind of leverage and mechanism to prevent and end the cycles of fighting. It is a shame that we ignore our natural partners for an arrangement with the Fatah movement and use Qatar to strengthen their rivals, Hamas, at Fatah's expense.

Another example to a correct win-win attitude is in the attempt to advance the relationships with the United Arab Emirates and Qatar simultaneously, even though they represent opposite coalitions in their approaches. On the other hand, the attempt to market the agreement with the Emirates as a victory over the Palestinians contradicts Israel's long-term interests to achieve an agreement with the Palestinians.

The challenge is that finding the common ground is in many cases less popular politically because the public expects to see "victories" and not compromises that are less dramatic and sexy.

One example from American diplomacy is the trade war that Trump declared on the Chinese economy. Even if the US is justified in its demand to change Chinese conduct, a trade war hurts the world and the American economy, instead of improving the situation by conducting negotiations with Chinese interests in mind.

Trump prefers to blame China, and the World Health Organization for the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, instead of trying to advance international cooperation in preventing the spread of the virus. In contrast, the Obama administration fought the Ebola pandemic through international cooperation when the disease appeared in Africa, instead of blaming the Africans.

PRESIDENT GEORGE H.W. Bush's attempt to defeat terrorism by eliminating the Ba'ath regime in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan, brought the rise of al-Qaeda and ISIS and the empowerment of Iran due to the defeat of her enemies on both geographic borders. Iraq – Iran's former nemesis – turned into a chaotic country under Shia control.

In contrast stands the unpopular decision of president Obama not to attack Syria after it used chemical weapons, and the choice to cooperate with Russia in clearing the chemical weapons from Syria. This decision did not eliminate all chemical weapons, but it did dispose of most of it, an essential change that enables the State of Israel to stop producing and distributing gas masks to its citizens. Trump's choice, on the other hand, to launch 59 cruise missiles into Syria achieved no change, and the US lost all leverage which turned to the hands of Russia, Iran and Turkey.

Another example is President Trump's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA nuclear agreement between the P5 + 1 and Iran, which resulted in Iran advancing closer to having a nuclear bomb; crushing the international coalition that was created by the Obama administration and empowering the extreme forces in the Iranian regime headed by the Revolutionary Guards. At the same time, the moderates who preferred a functioning Iranian economy over regional hegemony were weakened.

It is obvious that we can't ignore domestic politics, and that leaders need to provide their citizens with victories, but it is the leaders' responsibility to explain to the public that compromises are the way to achieve more than through "victories."

This attitude is true also in matters of hasbara, public diplomacy. Many people think the main role of diplomats is to win in arguments about the legitimacy of Israeli policy. My own experience taught me that the role of diplomats is not to win the debate, but to win hearts and minds. Winning hearts and minds is achievable through dialogue and engagement, not through argument. Arguments only persuade those who are already persuaded.

Based on the current reality of our populist leadership, the role of diplomats is to insist on advancing solutions that lead to the creation of value. The futile attempt to win the blame game does not solve anything and does not advance the state's true interests.

The classical example of a win-win approach is the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It will enable Israel to be the state of the Jewish people and a democracy at the same time, according to the Zionist vision, while enabling the Palestinians self-determination and the end of occupation. Israeli diplomacy should strive to achieve this solution as its main goal.

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