



Published on *The American Task Force on Palestine* (<http://www.americantaskforce.org>)

[Home](#) > [Printer-friendly PDF](#) > [Printer-friendly PDF](#)

---

## America's Diplomatic Fig Leaf

Amir Taheri

Asharq Alawsat

September 28, 2007 - 12:00am

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=2&id=10348> <sup>[1]</sup>

September 28, 2007

**Article Author(s):** Amir Taheri

**Media Outlet:** Asharq Alawsat

**Date:** September 28, 2007

**Source Link(s):** <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=2&id=10348> <sup>[2]</sup>

What do diplomats do when they don't know what to do? You guessed it; they propose holding an international conference. The device is useful on several grounds. It covers one's political nakedness with the fig leaf of an impression that something is being done. It creates a crowd to divert attention from one's isolation. And, last but not least, it enables one to put a tiresome problem on the backburner for a while.

Does the rule apply to Washington's proposal to convene an international conference on the Middle East peace in November?

Even if we do not suspect cynicism, I fear the answer is yes. Riding towards the sunset, the Bush administration appears anxious to furnish a void until its term ends in January 2009. The proposed conference looks like a mode of inhabiting the time available rather than achieving anything concrete.

Worse still, it may make actual peacemaking even more difficult. The reason is simple. War is one of the most intimate of human relationships, something similar to love. It brings two sides together in extreme proximity, excluding all others. A war always produces a winner and a loser who may or may not have their respective friends or foes. But no friend or foe would fully appreciate the taste of either victory or defeat as intensely as the actual protagonists for who have experienced war as existential reality.

The proposed international conference is scheduled to bring together the United Nations, the European Union, the United States, Russia, and The League of Arab Nations in addition to the Israelis and Palestinians. Each of the participants is certain to arrive with its own agenda and game plan and hopes of making as big a win as possible in exchange for as little investment as it can get away with.

Anybody who has bought a carpet in a Persian bazaar would know that the larger the number

of participants in a haggling session the less the chances of a deal being made.

The history of the Middle East conflict illustrates the point.

After the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948, the Palestinians who were most directly affected by the conflict were inclined to accept their status as losers in exchange for a space in which they could build their nationhood. The Arab states, however, would have none of that. They could afford to appear heroic at the expense of the Palestinians. Overtime, the cause of Palestine became an ideological toy and a political subterfuge for all sorts of people. The overexposure of the issue on the international scene made its resolution that much more difficult, especially during the Cold War when both blocs used the Middle East as a battleground for proxy wars.

The only times that Israel and its Arab neighbors managed to make deals were when the outsiders were kept outside.

Anwar Sadat's decision to go travel to Jerusalem was not the result of any international conference.

The Camp David summit in which the Egypt-Israel peace treaty was finalized was also a private matter between the two adversaries, although Jimmy Carter, the US President at the time, has tried to script a major role for himself in it. The Israel-Jordan peace treaty, too, was the result of bilateral, behind the scenes negotiations rather than any international conference. Finally, we have the Oslo accords, the most substantial agreements ever negotiated between Israel and the Palestinians- again on a strictly bilateral basis.

The three events cited above were made possible for a simple reason: Israel, as the victor had a clear vision of the maximum it was prepared to pay in exchange for the accords in question. At the same time, Egypt, Jordan and, in the case of Oslo accords, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), also developed clear visions of the minimum they were prepared to accept in exchange for the deals.

In contrast, numerous UN attempts at mediation and several conferences, the biggest of which was the one held in Madrid in 1992, failed to make an inch of progress towards peace.

One reason for the failure of international conferences is that, put under the limelight, the victor is always tempted to offer less while the vanquished is forced to demand more. The fact that one could always blame others for the failure of an international conference encourages all sorts of maximalist positions.

Since the Second World War, we have witnessed scores of conflicts in the four corners of the globe. Numerous nations have been made and unmade and many borders drawn and redrawn. Territories as small as Czechoslovakia and as big as the Indian subcontinent have been partitioned. The classical British and French empires and Russia's Soviet empire have been dismantled. Ironically, wherever and whenever the so-called international community, at times acting through the United Nations, became involved, the conflict in question was prolonged.

Look at Kashmir. The UN passed resolutions written in an ambiguous language designed to fudge the outcome of the war. Pakistan could not accept less than what people believed the UN resolutions had demanded. For its part, India could not contemplate offering more than what its people thought the UN demanded.

When it comes to the Palestinian problem, almost everyone interested would refer, parrot-like, to UN resolutions, especially 242 and 338. But these are ambiguous texts deliberately written in a language that makes peacemaking harder rather than easier. The resolutions were drafted to satisfy the rival blocs in the Cold War and not to meet the needs of Israel and the Palestinians. It was no surprise that for two decades, the Arabs rejected these resolutions while Israel interpreted them in ways that rendered them meaningless.

The only way that peace might be achieved is for a majority of both the Israelis and the Palestinians to conclude that the prolongation of the status quo is not in their best interest. As long as one or both sides feel comfortable with things as they are, they will have no incentive for risking the dramatic change that peace entails.

As I see it, neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians have reached the level of discomfort that renders the status quo unbearable. To Israel today, the principal threat comes from an increasingly assertive Khomeinist power in Tehran and its surrogates in Syria, Lebanon and Gaza. However, a war triggered by the Islamic Republic is sure to assume dimensions beyond Israel. At the same time, Israel's economy is booming, making the average citizen more risk-averse.

The Palestinians also feel comfortable with the status quo, albeit for different reasons. Hamas, having won control of Gaza by force, is too busy with a political version of ethnic cleansing to contemplate other strategies.

In any case, Hamas knows that progress towards peace could wreck its business as a radical movement dedicated to martyrdom and similar sensational pursuits. As for Fatah, it is keener on consolidating its hold on the West Bank than risking negotiations that might enable Hamas to portray label it as quisling. Speaking off the record, some Fatah leaders say they would rather focus on rebuilding the West Bank's economy than entering peace talks before the intra-Palestinian feud is sorted out.

Both Israel and Al Fatah know that the proposed international conference does not have a snowflake's chance in hell to produce lasting peace. However, both are determined to provide the fig leaf that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has been seeking ever since she decided to put the Bush Doctrine on the backburner.

---

TAGS: [Camp David](#) <sup>[3]</sup>

**[Events](#) | [Daily News](#) | [About Us](#) | [Resources](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Donate](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)**

 [Front Page Features](#)  [World Press Roundup](#)  [ATFP in the News](#)  [Policy and Analysis](#)  
 [Briefing Summaries](#)

---

**Source URL (retrieved on *May 23 2019 - 3:09am*):**

[http://www.americantaskforce.org/daily\\_news\\_article/2009/02/25/1235593328\\_0](http://www.americantaskforce.org/daily_news_article/2009/02/25/1235593328_0)

**Links:**

- [1] <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=2&id=10348>
- [2] <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=2&id=10348>
- [3] [http://www.americantaskforce.org/peace\\_negotiations/camp\\_david](http://www.americantaskforce.org/peace_negotiations/camp_david)