

Madrid Middle East Peace Conference

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In the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, which dislodged Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's forces from his brutal effort to annihilate Kuwait, the stature of the United States rose among most Middle Eastern Arab states. The United States organized and led the coalition that protected the territorial integrity of Arab States. Converting that prominence into support for Arab-Israeli diplomacy and regional security was part of the vision that President George Bush articulated after the war. In eight diplomatic shuttle missions to the region after Iraq's defeat, American Secretary of State James A. Baker III persevered in convincing Israel and her Arab neighbors to convene a Middle East Peace conference in Madrid on October 31, 1991.

America's role in repelling Saddam Hussein's aggression was in itself insufficient to convene an Arab-Israeli peace conference. A confluence of other factors made the Madrid Middle East Peace conference possible. First, there was a reluctant Arab acknowledgment that Israel's military and economic strength made it immovable from the Middle East. Second, in the absence of a major patron to provide international political support, financial assistance, and military aid, the Arab world lacked a military option to dislodge Israel from the region. Third, despite her own public fears of going to a conference where Arab states would align uniformly against her, Israel accepted the conference format where that possibility was prohibited. Israel was prepared and eager to negotiate bilaterally with Arab neighbors because her military superiority was unchallenged. Moreover, the Israeli public was weary of controlling the Palestinian population and wanted to find a suitable accommodation in which Israelis could separate their lives from governing the Palestinians who resided in East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Finally, both Israel and the Arab world placed their faith in American diplomatic choreography. For Israel, the United States remained its most dependable ally. Arab states, meanwhile, acquiesced to Washington's request to support the conference especially because those in the oil producing regions found that their territorial integrity, sovereignty, and political longevity were dependent upon a strong and long-term military relationship with the United States.

The three day Madrid Conference was precedent-setting. Not only were Arab states willing to meet with Israel in a conference format, they were willing to use the conference's ceremonial beginning as an opening to engage in direct bilateral talks with Israel. Unlike all previous efforts at Arab-Israeli conference diplomacy, the conference did not take place in the aftermath of a prolonged period of communal violence or state-to-state conflict between Israel and her Arab neighbors. Rather, it came after a long period of pre-negotiations. Political—not military—issues were the main items on the negotiating agenda. Like earlier official Arab-Israeli negotiations, the Madrid Conference was based on the content and concepts inherent in United Nations Resolution 242 and 338.

Each delegation came to the conference with the objective of fulfilling different purposes. But common to all of them was the desire to protect individual state interests. In general, the Arab delegations came to Madrid to negotiate. Israel did not want to negotiate in front of the media; she was interested only in negotiating after the conference in a strictly bilateral manner. Jordan's imperative was to let the Palestinians in the territories be the engine of negotiations and thereby diminish, if possible, the role of Arafat and the PLO. A joint Jordanian-Palestinian

delegation allowed Amman to remain harnessed to progress in the Jordanian-Palestinian theater while letting the Palestinians determine the procedural agenda. Palestinians sought parity with Israel; the international forum gave them a much desired spotlight. Egypt used the conference to promote additional agreements between Israel and Arab delegations in order to justify Cairo's earlier peace treaty with Israel and thereby continue the process of Cairo's complete and total return to world of inter-Arab politics.

Syrians were the most antagonistic of Arab states toward Israel. Syria's extreme tones put the Palestinians, Jordanians, and Egyptians in a comparatively more moderate light. Syria's fear, consistent with her deep disagreement with Egypt after the 1973 October Middle East War, was to be isolated from an Arab support system. Syria opposed progress on another Arab-Israeli front, lest it would leave Damascus negotiating its interests with Israel alone. Progress on the Israeli/Jordanian-Palestinian front would focus attention on Syrian presence and influence in Lebanon, an issue Syria did not want discussed. The prospect of an agreement with Israel about the Golan Heights would, in the eyes of Damascus, only brighten Israel's legitimacy and enhance the strategic influence of the United States in the region. Lebanon's presentation was noticeably restrained, leaving even the untrained ear to understand that Damascus would decide Beirut's negotiating options.

Like the December 1973 Geneva Conference, the Madrid Conference was an American-planned conference in which the Soviets played only a supporting role. The conference's formulation, conduct, and diplomatic aftermath reaffirmed the preeminent role of the United States over the Soviet Union in the region. [Months after the conference ended, the Soviet Union no longer existed.] American Secretary of State Baker was the diplomatic maestro. All sides looked to the United States to nurture the process, to break log jams, and to keep the negotiating ball in play. Out of the conference came bilateral talks between Israel and a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation and between Israel and Syria. Multilateral working groups emerged from the conference, which included discussions about arms control, economic development, the environment, refugees, and water. These were important discussions because they included Middle Eastern states outside the region that had, until then, cool or no diplomatic relations with Israel. It was from Madrid's bilateral talks that the secret negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis commenced in December 1992, culminating in the signing of the September 1993 Oslo Accords.

“Organizing this first-ever multilateral Arab-Israeli peace conference proved to be an enormous logistical challenge. In addition to arrangements ensuring proper security and accommodations for both delegations and the press, we had to determine nearly every aspect of the actual meeting—such details as the length and order of speeches, the design of the table (which we had specially built) where representatives would be seated (which was the subject of extensive squabbling among the parties), and the amount of space allotted to each delegation...

Except for a vivid painting of Charles V slaughtering the Moors, hurriedly warehoused for obvious reasons, Madrid's Royal Palace proved a splendid setting for the peace conference. Beneath eight stunning chandeliers in the ornate Hall of Columns, representatives of Israel, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and the Palestinians warily convened around a T-shaped table on the morning of October 30, 1991. The opening ceremonies were hosted by Presidents Bush and Gorbachev, whose eloquent remarks contributed to the sense of high drama and spectacle.

The scene exuded all the warmth of an arranged courtship, which in fact it was. Delegates appraised one another furtively, shunning direct eye contact and taking pains to avoid even a

perfunctory handshake. Except for the co-sponsors, national flags were banned from the ceremonies in deference to Israel's refusal to sit with a Palestinian delegation under the multi-colored banner of the PLO. I cannot remember any meeting so devoid of diplomatic trappings.

Yet by every reasonable barometer, Madrid was a resounding triumph. Its enduring legacy was simply that it happened at all. After forty-three years of bloody conflict, the ancient taboo against Arabs talking with Israelis had in a space of one carefully choreographed hour been dramatically consigned to the benches of history. Like the walls of Jericho, the psychological barriers of a half century came tumbling down with resounding finality that clear fall morning.

None of was swept up in the satisfaction of the moment nor harbored any illusions about the travails ahead. As I told reporters afterward, "We have to crawl before we walk, and we have to walk before we run, and today I think we all began to crawl." As I write these words over three years later, the peace process has matured to the point where these ancient adversaries are walking and may even learn to run. I'm hopeful that in my lifetime we'll see a splendid sprint toward a lasting peace. And I hope it doesn't sound arrogant to say that I'm proud to have contributed to a process which has begun to replace hatred with hope, and fear with friendship.

Some of my advisers said later they'd never seen me so serene. After eight months of grueling and oftentimes exasperating diplomacy, I suspect they simply confused serenity with sheer exhaustion. But in truth, I knew the President and I had accomplished something significant in the search for peace, and I hope to be forgiven some measure of self-satisfaction in that regard.

During a break in the opening session, I spotted Eytan Bentsur in the last row of the Israeli delegation. A career [Israeli] Foreign Service officer, Bentsur was a senior aid to [Israeli Foreign Minister] David Levy, who like his boss, was one of the few members of Shamir's government who I felt wholeheartedly supported the peace process. As early as September 1990, in fact, in a meeting with Dennis Ross at a New York delicatessen, he'd proposed the two-track formula that later became the center-piece for the U.S. initiative. I grasped his hand warmly, then he enveloped me in a giant bear hug. "We did it, Mr. Secretary, we did it," he said, with quiet emotion so infectious that it overpowered my usual reserve. "You're right Eytan, I said, "We did it."

Notes: In writing his memoir, Baker was either unaware or discounted previous Arab-Zionist or Arab-Israeli conferences, those notably held in London in February 1939, in Lausanne in 1949, or in Geneva in 1973. Dennis Ross was a top policy adviser to Baker. Trained with a doctorate in Political Science with a specialty on the Soviet Union, Ross ultimately transitioned from the Bush-Baker team to work during the Clinton administration as the State Department's point person on Middle East negotiations. In the 1990s, he frequently shuttled between Israeli, Palestinian, and other Arab leaders in the persistent quest to keep American engineered progress moving forward in Arab-Israeli negotiations. Ross was also responsible for helping choreograph and negotiate the 1997 Hebron Protocol.

Source: James A. Baker, III, *The Politics of Diplomacy Revolution, War & Peace, 1989-1992*, (New York: G.P. Putnam's and Sons), 1995, pp. 511-513.