**The Middle East and Central Asia at a crossroads**

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As the Trump presidency enters its final weeks, it is time to reflect on the profound changes that his tenure has brought around the world.  Donald Trump will leave an indelible mark on the global community which has become more racist, more inequitable, more nationalistic, and less compassionate over the past four years.  To understand the extent of change, one has to look no further than the inequitable distribution of medical supplies and vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic to see the impact of the United States’ “everyone-for-themselves” philosophy under Trump.

The “Make America Great Again” movement has also made the United States more isolationist and apathetic to the interests of other countries.  This phenomenon transcends party lines.  Countries around the world are now dealing with the reality that after decades of American superpower interventionalist policies, the United States has become an unreliable and/or marginal player in many international affairs.  Four years of Trumpian rule by chaos, has left countries scrambling to form new alliances to protect their interests.  Nowhere is this more apparent than the Arab/Israeli conflict where a combination of “my enemy’s enemy is my friend”, U.S. bribery, and conflict exhaustion has driven Israel and several Sunni countries to find mutual benefit in open relationships.  Not since the era of the NATO countries and Soviet Union using the Arab/Israeli conflict as pawns in their competition, has there been such an inflection point for new players and new thinking.  This change of Jews and Muslims seeing a mutual benefit in working together has the potential to benefit their peoples in profound ways.  Out of chaos, there is potential for new order.

Jewish and Muslim collaboration should not come at the expense of the Palestinian people and their legitimate rights.  Compromise is required from both sides of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict for progress to be made.  The question for other countries needs to be if Israelis and Palestinians cannot move away from their maximalist demands, is it worth their while to support either side.   Both the Israelis and Palestinianshave the shared, unrealistic dreamthat they will wake up one day and the other will be gone.  With each passing generation, Palestinians have become more anti-Semitic and Israelis have become more racist.  They talk past each other, both unwilling, and unfortunately now unable, to even listen to the other’s narrative.  It is analogous to a bad marriage where the couple is cohabitating and have shared economic interests and resources but cannot have a civil discourse.  Someone needs to facilitate a dialogue and the Trump years have proven that the United States cannot play that role, nor given the range of damage inflicted on the U.S. by Trump, does the new Biden administration have an ability to move to a position of neutral facilitator.  Neither can the Europe, whose anti-Semitism and racist colonial mentality caused much of the problem, nor are Russian and Chinese moral compasses one would want to follow.

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Sunni rapprochement with Israel needs to come from one of the Sunni regional powers, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and/or Turkey.  Turkey has focused recent efforts on being recognized as regional power but part of increasing its power status is built on direct competition with Israel.  President Erdogan has staked too much of his political future on this competition and Turkey has already reaped the benefits of economic and security cooperation from its historic ties with Israel.  Saudi Arabia and Pakistan could potentially play the role together, but the reality is that Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s misadventures have undermined his credibility.  Although, it should be noted that a Saudi blessing of a compromise is essential for success, and that Saudi Arabia would be a major benefactor from a rapprochement with Israel and an end to the conflict.

It would be easy to dismiss Pakistan as a potential candidate given its reputation for instability and extremism, both deserved and undeserved.  Pakistan in many ways is the country most similar to Israel and the Sunni country that has the most to gain from rapprochement (without American bribery).  Like Israel, Pakistan is a country created by the U.N. as a refuge for a religious group fleeing persecution.  Both have complex relationships with illegal occupations.  Both became a nuclear power to protect themselves from hostile neighbors.  The geopolitical significance and military might of both exceeds its size and both spend a disproportionate amount of money on their militaries.  Both countries are threatened by internal political and religious extremism.  Both view their people as their most important resource given the scarcity of natural resources.  Israel long ago recognized that its brain power was the key to its power.  Pakistan now recognizes that its future depends on developing it brain power.  Both know a positive reality for future generations in their countries is dependent on tamping down hostilities with neighbors.  In spite of the dreams of both their neighboring adversaries of them going away some day, the reality is that nuclear powers only go away in suicidal confrontations.  Another big common denominator is that Israeli and Pakistani young people know that in order to build a brighter future for themselves the instability, conflict, and corruption must end.  In Israel and Pakistan,the average man-on-the-street in both countries has a strong animosity towards the other, while the elites are becoming aware that ongoing animosity benefits neither side.

Political realities make it impossible for Pakistan to move too boldly, but as a fellow nuclear power, Pakistan has the shared reality that no nuclear power will negotiate away its existence nor be defeated in other than a mutual suicide withits adversaries.  What is victory worth if it entails mutual destruction, as well as the destruction of the holy sites in Jerusalem?Pakistan, with the support of Saudi Arabia, can open a preliminary dialogue that makes it clear to both parties that tough, painful compromise will be necessary from both parties.Pakistan needs to help both the Israelis and Palestinians develop realistic opening positions; which means moving away from their maximalist positions and recognizing each other’s narratives. Frankly, the Western powers during the first and second world wars planted the seeds of disfunction for the Israeli and Palestinian peoples which were nurtured and fertilized by the Cold War.  Both peoples need to recognize the fact that they were “sold” the same house by an unscrupulous agent is a significant root cause underlying their narrative, so they both have an irreversible legitimate claim.  Again, since neither will voluntarily leave the entire house, they must figure out how to divide up the rooms.  Part of the challenge will be getting the Israelis to understand they can’t unilaterally pick the rooms they want first, as well as control the hallways and utilities.  The Palestinians have to realize that they have to give up claims to all the rooms and that the house actually has a maximum occupancy capacity.

The outcome of this long shot approach would be a win-win for everyone, even the Israelis and Palestinians who would end the conflict in a draw.  An Israeli-Sunni alliance built on mutual benefit and not simply animosity towards Iran would have profound development and economic benefits for all.  There is a small window of opportunity to exploit an opening in the waning days of Trumpian chaos and what is likely to be a return to the stale unbalanced pro-Israel biased ideas of previous American administrations (writer is a security and risk management expert based in Encinitas, California, USA. E Mail: siegel@msiegel.net).