

Middle East peace is in Kushner's hands

When Jordan's King Abdullah II was in Washington a few weeks ago, he said at a White House news conference that the Israel-Palestine dispute was ultimately the most important in the Middle East. He is right, of course, though many Americans, blinded both by pro-Israel sentiment and a wilful misunderstanding of history, would disagree.

The king did not mean that the Islamic State, the war in Iraq and the Syrian civil war were caused by the Israelis and the Palestinians. What he meant was that these horrifying wars – with the Islamic State at the center — were fueled by the seemingly unending dispute and sometimes outright war between Palestine and Israel.

Arab children grow up with a seething resentment over what they are taught was the theft of Arab land by the Israelis. Young Palestinians watch as land farmed by their families for generations is seized by the Israeli government for use as Jewish settlements, settlements that are regarded by the world community, including the United States and the United Nations, as illegal. Muslim religious leaders throughout the region preach that Jewish occupation of Jerusalem is unacceptable and must be rejected.

This is the world in which young Israelis, Arabs and Iranians in the Middle East grow up, and they often respond with acts of terrorism. Justifiable? No, of course not. But yes, they are understandable. And the quarrel is not just Muslim vs. Jew. The most hard-line Palestinians I knew in the Middle East were Christians, not Muslims. George Habash, the leader of what some observes called the "extremist" Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine was a Christian. It is the sheer unfairness

of it all that infuriates so many people. The dispute is the driving force here, and it extends to every country in the Middle East and every quarrel. This is what the king meant.

This week, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas visited the White House, shook the president's hand, faced the cameras and presented his case. He came in a weakened position as he is now 82 years old and he is getting ready to step down. Moreover, his leadership is undermined by the fact that the Gaza Strip is in the hands of Hamas — which the U.S. government has designated a foreign terrorist organization — while the occupied West Bank is in the hands of the more moderate Palestine Liberation Organization, itself the most infamous terrorist organization created in 1964.

Nevertheless, some years ago such a visit would have been unthinkable, as almost all Palestinian leaders were regarded as terrorists. Much has changed in the past 20 years. What has not changed is the behavior of so many members of Congress, eager to show their support for Israel and throw the Palestinians under the bus. It is disgraceful and a major reason why the U.S. is so mistrusted in the Middle East.

Supporting Israel is regarded as a foreign policy litmus test for a member of Congress. It also is foreign policy rubbish, as such an attitude prevents the U.S. from taking a more objective view of the Israel-Palestine dispute and such an attitude undermines the search for peace.

What galls members of Congress of both parties is the policy of the governing Palestinian Authority to make financial payments to families of Palestinians who commit acts of violence against Israelis and Americans. According to Sander Gerber, a New York hedge fund

manager who has studied the issue for many years, the Palestinian Authority spends about \$315 million a year in distributing funds to some 36,000 families, to support “widows and orphans” of those Palestinians caught in the act. The Israelis claim this amounts to subsidizing terrorism and demand an end to the practice. So do members of Congress. The Palestinians defend the practice as an exercise in humanitarianism and they say the Israeli policy of establishing more and more settlements in the occupied West Bank is the real cause of terrorism.

Into this morass of charges and countercharges steps young Jared Kushner, the president’s son-in-law and an official adviser. It is said that the untried and untested Kushner is to be the President Donald Trump’s chief peace negotiator between the Israelis and Palestinians. It’s an interesting proposition given that Kushner and his family have close business and religious ties to Israel. On the other hand, perhaps a fresh face and a good mind is just what is needed.

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