

The Middle East Peace Process: How Did I Get It So Wrong?

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Abstract

In this article, Michael Dumper critically examines his engagement with the Middle East peace process from 1992 through to 2023. He provides an overview and a discussion of some of the key issues and the contribution played by Track Two discussions, particularly in relation to Palestinian refugees and Jerusalem. The section on Jerusalem explores in more detail the difficulties in finding a mutually agreeable framework for the management of the holy sites in the city and considers the approaches of some of the groups participating in these discussions. The author also reflects on the cultural and educational influences that guided his participation in these discussions and some of the pitfalls he failed to avoid. The way in which academia is coopted into policy making is also considered. The conclusion offers both some lessons learned and a prognosis for the prospects of a negotiated agreement.

Keywords

Negotiations; Middle East; peace; Track Two; Jerusalem; Old City; Palestinian Liberation Organization; Israel; holy sites; refugees.

Editor's Note

This is an abridged and slightly revised version of Professor Mick Dumper's public Valedictory Lecture to students, faculty, and invited guests delivered at Exeter University on 20 January 2023. The conclusion has been altered to take into account the Gaza crisis in October 2023.

There is a curious tradition in the UK's Foreign Office where senior diplomats, on their retirement from their last overseas posting, sometimes write a more candid account of their thoughts and judgments concerning the issues and people they have had to deal with. It is a refreshing counterpoint to the cautious and rather stuffy statements normally made. My working life as an

activist and as an academic has spanned the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) from its beginnings in the mid-1990s to its slow collapse over the past ten years. What follows is an attempt to take this Foreign Office tradition and examine quite critically some of the choices I took and the judgments I made as an academic engaged with the MEPP.

At the same time, this will not be some Maoist self-criticism in which I publicly berate myself in order to obtain redemption from my peers. I employ my experience of the MEPP as a kind of “case study” which may shine a light on the messiness and dilemmas such engagement has led to. My intention is that it will be useful to both students and to colleagues who may have had similar experiences and perhaps help them avoid some of the pitfalls I encountered.

The MEPP and Me

Given the audience, I do not need to enter into all of the details of the genesis of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in this essay. Nevertheless, I should outline my personal take on the evolution of the MEPP as it helps explain my change of heart. In essence, the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 led to the dispossession and exile of approximately 750,000 Palestinians residing in the Palestine of the British Mandate period. Now, at the end of 2023, these refugees and their descendants number over seven million, spread throughout the region, and many have not given up the hope of either returning to their homes or the homes of their parents or grandparents or seeking some sort of reparation for their loss and their enforced exile. This has been the core of the conflict for seventy-five years.

The MEPP has been an attempt to reconcile incompatible rights – those of the Palestinian refugees to a state and to reparations with those of the Zionist Jewish settlers who created Israel, many of whom suffered discrimination and persecution in their countries of origin, and whose children and grandchildren regard the part of Palestine that became Israel in 1948 as their home. The MEPP is also based on a model of partition and the existence of two states – Israel and Palestine. Israel exists but the location, size, and nature of Palestine is still to be determined.

Formal regional negotiations began in Madrid in 1991 and culminated in the 1993 Oslo accords between the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the government of Israel. At their core, the accords comprised a series of confidence-building measures. These included an Israeli withdrawal from some of the territory it had occupied during the 1967 war – East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip – and the establishment of a semi-autonomous Palestinian administration. The hope was that as the benefits of peace became obvious to all, Israel would continue to withdraw its armed forces from more occupied territory, and the Palestinian Authority would step into the space provided with more services and security.

Again, I do not have the space to track here the sporadic ebb and flow of negotiations over approximately three decades. Suffice it to say the process was punctuated with major summits and conferences to finalize details, such as the Camp David summit

in 2000 and the Annapolis Conference in 2016. But non-compliance with agreements on both sides led to mistrust and bad faith which, in turn, kept extending deadlines further and further. The end result of such a protracted process was, first, stasis – no movement whatsoever on political issues accompanied by low-level conflict as further compromises were discussed – and, second, regression – as changing political developments in Israel and among Palestinians eroded the support for the compromises that, even in the best of circumstances, had been difficult to consolidate.

Despite frequent attempts to keep the process alive over the past decade and a half, weak Palestinian leadership and deep internal Palestinian divisions, combined with unflinching refusal by Israel to unpack the dispossession of 1948, the MEPP has finally run out of road. Fundamentally, the major flaw of the MEPP was a disagreement over the causes of the conflict. The Palestinians wanted to negotiate their dispossession and exile of 1948 and the Israelis wanted to restrict negotiations to their withdrawal from some areas of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip that they had occupied in 1967.

Turning to my own (small) part in the MEPP, the collapse of progress to a negotiated agreement has led me to examine in what ways I may have been complicit in its failure and why. I am not saying I was responsible: that would grossly overstate my role! I played a very small part on the very periphery of the negotiations. I see myself as having been a lowly stagehand helping to move the furniture and scenery around for a play on a grand stage. I will return to this theater analogy later. As is often the case of stagehands, I had, nevertheless, a pretty good view of the action and was happy to contribute in my small way.

An important part of the overall negotiations were the “Track Two” discussions which preceded or even ran parallel with them. These were opportunities for participants who were close to the formal delegations to probe positions, try out ideas and delineate areas of possible agreement. Much of the detailed examination of the formal proposals discussed in the official conferences and summits had actually taken place during these Track Two discussions. For example, one of the main issues blocking progress on the future of Jerusalem was the governance of the Old City of Jerusalem and who would control the holy sites within it. The Canadian-led Jerusalem Old City Initiative explored in forensic detail how the Old City could be administered with a high degree of international supervision as a means of alleviating the tensions around the Old City so that progress could be made in other areas.¹ Many of the ideas we explored in this project emerged in the bridging proposals submitted by the United States during the Annapolis Conference in 2007. (See map 1)

From the 1990s onward, I became increasingly embedded in a series of Track Two discussions run by, among many others, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the United Nations Office of the Special Coordinator for the MEPP (UNSCO), the Canadian Department for Trade and International Trade (DFAIT), the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House), the Olaf Palme International Center, the University of Windsor (Canada), the Toledo International Center for Peace, the Max Planck Institute for Comparative

Public Law and International Law, the Rockefeller Foundation, the UK Department for International Development, and the Fondation des Treilles.² In addition, I was asked by the FCO to supply background research and training for some of the PLO negotiators on the question of Jerusalem and by the PLO's Negotiation Support Unit to review its Jerusalem negotiation objectives and strategy. Like many other academics in this field, I was also invited to participate in numerous seminars and conferences run by university departments, smaller think tanks, and NGOs which included a Track Two component.



The two main areas in which I tried to make a contribution were the future of the Palestinian refugees and the future of Jerusalem. Most of my work on the refugee situation was through the European Union, UNRWA, Chatham House, and the Canadian International Development Research Center, and focused on trying to identify both feasible models of a refugee return and acceptable forms of reparations based upon international precedents.³ The work was very detailed. Some sessions went as far as calculating and costing the schools, hospitals, roads, and accommodation that would be required for a given number of returning refugees over a given period. Another notable session even included the drafting of a series of possible apologies for Israelis and Palestinians to offer to each other as part of a reparations package.

Jerusalem

On Jerusalem, I participated in many of the discussions on alternative models of governance that would be appropriate to different scenarios – a divided city with an Israeli and a Palestinian municipality, a shared city with sub-municipalities and an umbrella coordination council, a divided city with an international zone for the holy sites, a divided city with security cooperation, and so on.⁴ Of all those scenarios, I devoted the most time and energy to the ones focused on the management of holy sites.

Holy sites were a particularly difficult issue to find agreement on. They cannot be traded in the same way as, say, mineral resources or strategic river crossing points. Holy sites are more intangible as they relate to spirituality, heritage, and community identities. Nor can you divide a mosque, church, or synagogue between antagonistic parties and keep the meaning and integrity of the site.⁵ Offering access to lesser alternative sites or recognizing the importance of a site to the other party and the possibility of conditional access to it were the weak tools available in looking for some kind of *modus vivendi*.

A complication to these discussions was, ironically, the need to include the views and arguments of religious authorities, scholars, and clergy. While many of these saw the need for compromise and sharing for the sake of minimizing friction and promoting peaceful coexistence, others took a much longer and more celestial view. As conveyors of the divine message, their view was often that a concession over, say, granting access to a particular holy site would transgress the guardianship their role encompassed, and that there was no need to make concessions this century when in the next century these demands may not exist. I recall one long discussion with the most senior clergymen in a particular Christian denomination who argued that criticism of their management of religious property in and around Jerusalem was misplaced. It should be seen, not through the lens of Palestinian or Israeli nationalism, but through the intention to uphold a presence for the church in the Holy Land for all time.

Lurking behind these discussions was always the realization that compromises were entirely contingent upon a contemporaneous balance of power. Muslim control over sites in Jerusalem stemmed from the long period of ‘Abbasid, Mamluk, and Ottoman rule under which competing claims by other religious communities were framed and restricted. The momentum behind the current Israeli and Jewish claims over access and use of sites in Jerusalem is driven by the military occupation of East Jerusalem and the power of religious nationalism in Israel which has provided a powerful platform to further such claims. During these Track Two discussions, it was difficult to disentangle the intrinsic value of the site to a community from the dynamics of the political context.

In addition to the holy sites issue in Jerusalem, was another equally important issue – how to construct a security regime that would satisfy Israel’s concerns and at the same time recognize the security role of whatever Palestinian political entity for East Jerusalem had been agreed upon. When it came to protecting Jewish holy sites and the possibility of Palestinian militants infiltrating across the border of a Palestinian state into Jerusalem, Israel demanded a complete monopoly over the security regime in place. If this was the starting point of negotiations, then the presence of the myriad

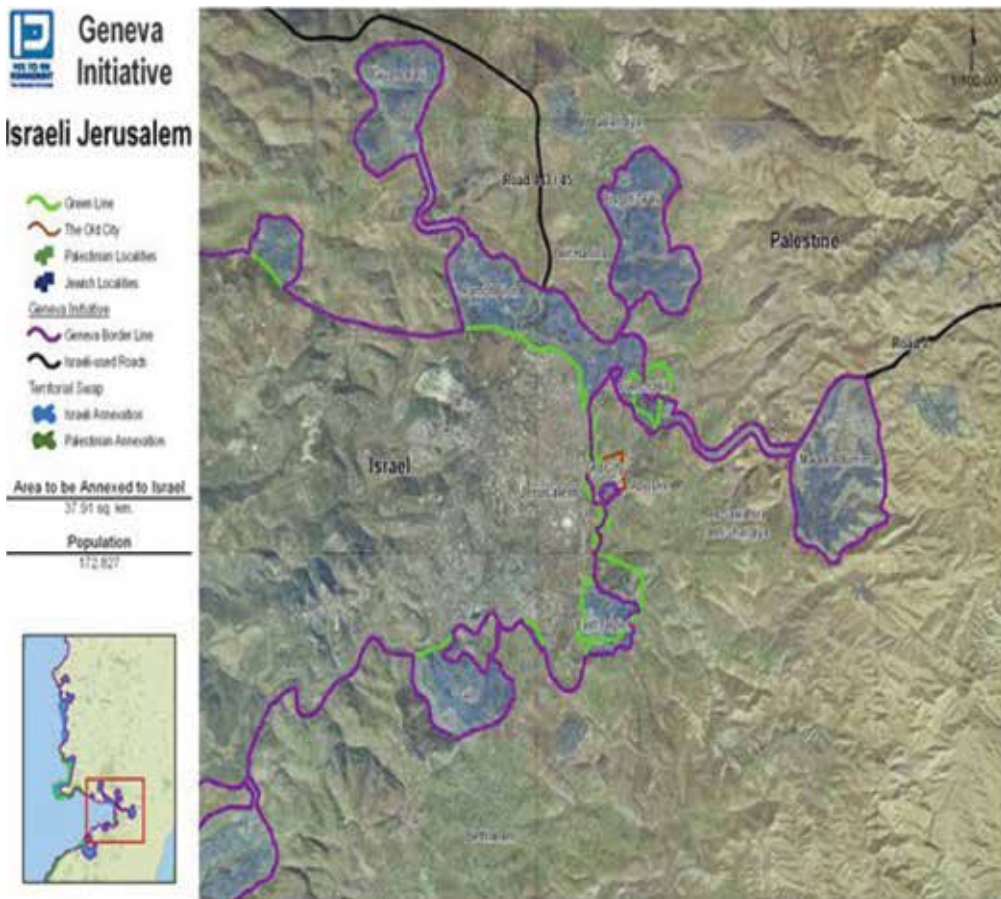
number of Jewish holy sites in East Jerusalem meant that a territorial division became increasingly complicated as, during the whole of the MEPP, these sites in and around the Old City were deliberately consolidated and even expanded by Israeli organizations. At the same time, international precedents offered a valuable resource in providing models for a variegated and flexible security regime in Jerusalem.⁶ During the 2010s, part of my research was to explore and “reality test” these models. None of them quite suited Jerusalem but I had the unenviable task of trying to identify the “least bad option,” knowing all the time that political events beyond the negotiations were unravelling any prospect of a warm peace that would allow such an option to work to some degree, and that, instead, a cold “truce” was becoming the best outcome to be hoped for.⁷

One important lesson I learned was that in these kinds of backroom or supplementary discussions, there was no “eureka” moment when everything fell into place, or you found the perfect fit for the last piece of the jigsaw. In fact, the opposite was true. Every possible agreement on a particular mechanism or institutional framework was heavily caveated by progress in other areas being negotiated. An agreed framework for managing the holy sites, for example, was contingent on overarching security understandings between the PLO and Israel, or on land swaps and the status of Israeli settlements in Jerusalem, or on the land corridor to Gaza, or on where returning refugees would be located and what reparation they might be offered, and so on. Indeed, it was even more complicated since the external political environment was also changing quickly, so any progress in one area was often paralyzed by a provocative Israeli raid on a refugee camp or a Palestinian group ambushing an Israeli patrol in the West Bank or merely changes in personnel at the top of the negotiating pyramids of each party. The lack of a stable environment and of continuity made progress akin to walking through a river of molasses pushing you backward all the time.

There were also duplicate processes within Track Two. There was the Aix group, the London track, the Geneva Initiative, the Jerusalem Old City Initiative (JOCI), to name but a few. While these could be competitive and even exclusionary and secretive, they also provided some cross-fertilization of ideas. For example, while the Geneva Initiative proposed schemes for the sharing and division of Jerusalem, it also devoted considerable energy to the Old City, which was the focus of the work of the JOCI team.⁸ My view of the Geneva Initiative was that it was brimming with useful ideas, but ultimately it was based on the balance of power at the time of discussion and in effect consolidated Israeli gains made in the period since the 1967 war. In addition, while its solutions were often imaginative, in practice they were fragile and unworkable in the medium to long term. It proposed long curling corridors for link roads between Israeli settlements, tunnels under and bridges over Palestinian areas, walls, and fences – all of which corresponded to the patchwork of Israeli settlement in East Jerusalem. (See map 2) This approach also applied to its proposals on the Old City, which would have divided up that small area into different Israeli and Palestinian zones.

The JOCI team worked on the assumption that if a suitable framework could be established for administering the Old City and its holy sites, then this would unlock further agreements on other aspects of how the city could be governed. It adopted the

model of an international zone for the Old City and explored in great detail how this could work in practice.⁹ Sub-groups worked on security, holy sites, the administration of justice, landownership, and so on. My main concern about its approach was that it also proposed deferring the question of sovereignty over the Old City for ten years; that is, it fudged the application of UN Resolution 242 to the Old City. In effect, the JOCI proposals did not confirm that the starting point for any agreement should be the recognition of Palestinian sovereignty over the areas of Jerusalem up to the 1967 borders, which included the Old City. In addition, I regarded a ten-year interim phase as much too long, inevitably establishing a new legal *status quo* that would undermine Palestinian claims to the Old City. Nevertheless, given the Old City's religious associations for both Israelis and Palestinians, I believe there will be a need for "special arrangements" over the holy sites, without which we will not get an agreement. The JOCI team carried out useful work in this direction and some of its ideas are likely to be taken off the shelf and updated if there is to be a negotiated agreement over Jerusalem.¹⁰



Map 2. The Geneva Initiative: Israeli Jerusalem.

One idea I tried to feed into these discussions over the Old City never took off, and I am not sure why. Given the Palestinian determination that their sovereignty over the Old City should be recognized, and given the Israeli insistence that they could not allow Palestinian control over their holy sites in any way whatsoever, especially in the Jewish Quarter, I thought the extra-territorialization of a significant part of the Israeli-designated Jewish Quarter might square this circle. All embassies are extra-territorialized, so it is not without legal precedent. In essence, the Israeli embassy to the Palestinian state could be nominally located in the Jewish Quarter which would be under Palestinian sovereignty but extraterritorial. This would allow Israel to employ whatever security measures it thought appropriate, allow access to the Jewish holy sites there and confer recognition of Palestinian sovereignty. Clearly this and other such ideas can only be contemplated in a completely different political atmosphere to the one we are witnessing in late 2023.

When I total up the various grants I received on the MEPP activities, depending on how one defines MEPP “engagement,” I come to an approximate total of £1.7 million over a twenty-five year period. I hasten to emphasize that these funds were not fees paid to me. They were funds either for travel, accommodation, subsistence, venue hire, and other logistics; for people participating in conferences, workshops, and seminars that I was convening; for publications which I was commissioned to edit or write; or for postgraduate students who I recruited to carry out research on MEPP-related topics. For example, one big international conference on international law and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict held in Exeter cost over ninety thousand pounds.¹¹

The point I wish to make here is not to draw attention to the success in obtaining grants for the university, but to the extraordinary large amounts of money – for a social science discipline – that were available for research and policy engagement on the MEPP. This clearly reflected the value placed on the MEPP by grant-awarding bodies and funders, which in turn were channeling the political priorities and agenda of governments and public opinion. Nevertheless, the MEPP collapsed. As this snapshot of one academic in a smallish university on the fringes of Western Europe indicates, despite the huge investment in time and resources by influential actors, the forces aligned against the success of the MEPP proved to be stronger. And being there in its midst, during the beginning and its middle stages, I was also able to witness its unravelling.

Why Did I Continue to Support the MEPP?

Given the fact that the MEPP began unravelling from about 2007–10 onward, why did I continue to engage with Track Two activities around the MEPP for so long? I think there are two main reasons or explanations.

The first is the social, religious, and political environment in which I grew up and in which I was trained and felt comfortable. I was born and raised in a strong Anglican environment – my father was a clergyman (and later a bishop) and my

mother a president of a diocesan Mother's Union – and this led me to adopt some basic assumptions about human behavior. Despite all the faults of the Church of England, particularly regarding gender and inclusivity, the message I imbibed through the many church activities in which I was involved was that one of the main purposes in our life is to make the world a better place to live in. I was and am not a saint by any means, but this framework led me to seek to avoid conflict and competition. It motivated me to generally adopt a problem-solving approach to disputes that explicitly avoided zero-sum games and the advance of the interests of a particular group or class.

As I moved away from the Anglican church and explored alternative forms of religious expression in my twenties, I became very attracted to the work of the Quakers and their commitment to peace and internationalism. As a result, I was delighted when a couple of years after graduation I was offered the post as the British Quaker Middle East coordinator. Dialogue, compromise, inclusivity, reaching out to opponents, challenging powerful interests – all were part of my brief in this role, and along the way I met many inspiring individuals who confirmed to me in their words and deeds the rightness of this approach.

This experience framed my approach to negotiations. I would assume that the parties involved were seeking agreement and were prepared to compromise to do so. As a result, I clearly failed to recognize the extent to which some parties manipulated negotiations to further their national or organizational interests. My assumption was that by sitting at the negotiating table, a commitment had been made to work together to resolve differences. Now that I look back, I realize how very naïve I was.

What this set of assumptions also meant was a poor analysis of the dynamics of power. The study of politics is the study of power – what constitutes power and how it is exercised. My academic training will have introduced me to many ways of analyzing power but, for me, there was a disconnect between the theories and patterns discussed in the literature and their application to a real-life situation.

My culturally determined assumption that a zero-sum game would be anathema to those involved in negotiations remained my starting point – and was a fundamental flaw. It failed to recognize how the promotion of ethnic and nationalist or sectarian interests drove the negotiating tactics of many of the participants. For example, my starting point did not sufficiently account for economic and military factors. Yes, Israel needed to have access to the markets of the Arab and the Islamic world and a peace agreement with the Palestinians was, at that time, a key to that. But economically, Israel was strong, with powerful allies, and could survive without an agreement. The same could not be said about Palestinians, who were in a much weaker position. You could almost fit the economy of Palestine into an industrial estate of a medium-sized city in the UK.

Similarly, after the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt in 1978, and between Israel and Jordan in 1994, and also after the destruction of the Iraqi army by the United States in 2001, there was very little serious military threat to Israel from its immediate neighbors. Certainly, despite all the media attention given to Palestinian military operations, the Palestinian threat to the Israeli armed forces was insignificant.

Tourists and inward investment may have been deterred but without a single fighter jet in their arsenal, the Palestinian armed forces were no match for the Israeli army.

From the mid-2000s onward it should have been clear to me that Palestinian leverage in the negotiations was critically weakened by the lack of economic resources it had at its disposal and the lack of a military threat it posed to Israel. Consequently, the incentive for the Israeli leadership to make concessions, especially in the face of an increasingly nationalistic and sectarian Israeli population, was drastically reduced. U.S. and European pressure, which alone was trying to keep up the momentum of negotiations, was not enough. Politically, Israel did not and does not need to make concessions. It took me a long time to see how my overly positive perspective on the negotiations obscured a much darker side of the process.

A second explanation for my continuing to engage with the MEPP lay in the career structure of a British academic like myself. During the 1980s, I was based much of the time in the Middle East, working not only with the Quakers but with other NGOs and charities, and also with think-tanks as a researcher on political issues. I had at that time half an eye on a career in the UN. I also received support and advice from an influential Palestinian academic, Professor Walid Khalidi, who was able to channel research grants in my direction, and as a result I was offered a temporary position at Exeter University. After I obtained a PhD in 1993, the position became permanent.

Simultaneously in 1993 came the Oslo accords and the first glimmers of a peace process and the need for expertise. Suddenly a new horizon of policy engagement in the Middle East opened up. With my existing contacts in the voluntary sector on both sides of the conflict, my first-hand knowledge of key issues, and my status as an academic in a university with a reputation for Middle East expertise, I was ideally placed to play a part. So, for the next twenty years, I was almost constantly engaged in providing briefing papers, carrying out in-depth studies, organizing workshops, and facilitating discussions between diplomats, politicians, academics, and security and intelligence officials.

From the amount of funds that were channeled through me to Exeter University, one can begin to gauge how much was being spent to oil the cogs of this enormous machine that became the MEPP. As a late-starter academic, being awarded grants such as these led to a rapid rise in my status in the department and the university, which led to steady promotion, to salary increases, to being head-hunted by other universities, which, in turn, led to further promotion and eventually to a professorship. It was a bit of a whirlwind and for what, it seemed, a manifestly a good cause – at least in the first ten years.

I can honestly say that this was not the reason I undertook this work. Being part of the search for an agreement that could reverse or mitigate the historical injustice meted out to the Palestinians and that could offer some security to Israel was in itself a great reward. It was also fantastically interesting. I was meeting people who were either pulling powerful levers behind the scenes or figuring prominently in the daily media. One of the frustrating and dispiriting things about being an academic is that you never can be sure if your research is valuable to the wider community. But during

this period of late 1990s and 2000s, the MEPP presented me with an almost bespoke opportunity to put my knowledge, expertise, and interpersonal skills to good use.

Two Awkward Questions

At this point I want to digress slightly to pose two rather awkward questions. The first is: *Was I a spy?* Looking at the list of activities I was involved in, I could not blame anyone wanting to ask that question. For example, at one point in the late 2000s, I was running or was involved simultaneously in four projects on the issues of Jerusalem and Palestinian refugees: with the PLO, with the Foreign Office, and with two think tanks. And I felt quite self-conscious at the number of meetings where I would meet again the same participants, some of whom would say: *What, Dr. Dumper, you? Again?! Are you a spy?*

Indeed, I recognized that my research and projects were the perfect cover for information gathering but it was disturbing for me to feel that, however good my intentions were and however careful I was in handling sensitive material, there were those who in the end would not trust me. At the same time, I was also aware that the perception of others that I may have been employed by one of the various intelligence services with which the MEPP was riddled, was also quite useful. It meant I was taken perhaps a little more seriously and while some things were kept from me, other things were passed onto me deliberately in the mistaken assumption it would be conveyed to some higher level.

My family and close friends know that this role of being a spy is a bit of a joke. At home, I am more the bumbling Mr. Bean than Jason Bourne or James Bond. My sons just laughed at me when I mentioned it. My close friends also know that I am a terrible gossip and find it hard to keep a secret, which is hardly a qualification for espionage. And most telling of all – despite years of study – I speak poor Arabic and worse Hebrew, which also would seem to disqualify me as a source of information at a very basic level.

It is actually the second question, however, which I find more troubling: *Was I a useful idiot?* “Useful idiot” is a term that refers to academics who are used to grace the boards of businesses, NGO trustee boards, government committees, and the like, to confer legitimacy, credibility, and the appearance of competence and expertise to their work or policy agenda. Having a useful idiot on your team is like having a piece of intellectual bling.

As the MEPP began to stretch out into its second and third decade, in the 2000s and 2010s, it became increasingly institutionalized. Track Two workshops, conferences, background studies, and the like became part of the regular budget of foreign ministries, international organizations, and conflict resolution NGOs, with full-time staff allocated to organizing them. The participation of academics and other experts in this merry-go-round became an essential feature of their processes and outcomes. The same academics were being asked time and time again to participate in a new dialogue

exercise which was only slightly different from one which they had participated in perhaps a month before, but funded by a different sponsor. Yet, their presence was required as a sign of relevance and seriousness of that project. And as the progress of the MEPP stalled and began to reverse after 2010, I became increasingly aware that invitations to me and others were looking like attempts to meet certain reporting criteria for budget holders rather than serious attempts to resolve a specific issue in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

I have to admit, I do think that I became a kind of “useful idiot.” I did receive invitations to meetings which I could see were box-ticking exercises by a foreign ministry to show that they “had a seat at the negotiating table.” At the same time, I can argue there was a transactional dimension to fulfilling this role. I also got something out of it which was valuable. I would be happy to attend such a box-ticking exercise, although knowing it would not lead to anything substantial or lasting in terms of the peace process, because as a professional researcher, the occasion would provide me with an excellent opportunity to be updated, meet key interlocutors, gauge the prospects of progress in a fast-moving area – for example, security cooperation over the management of holy sites – all of which were important to allow me to continue to offer advice and make judgments. Bear in mind that, for all of this period, I lived not in London or Jerusalem or Brussels, but on a small farm in mid-Devon, so playing the “useful idiot” card was a practical way to connect with the international networks so essential for my own research.

I want to return to my previous analogy of my involvement with the MEPP being similar to that of a stagehand in a theater production. In terms of characterizing the nature of my analysis, the MEPP “play” was fascinating and uplifting, the text was gripping, the actors quite extraordinary, the props and scenery exquisite. Being a stagehand in such a production was rewarding in so many ways. So far, so good. But I think I was so busy moving props around that I did not stop to ask further questions: Who actually wrote the play? Who employed the actors and which ones? Who selected the play in the first place and chose the director? Furthermore, who owned the theater and what audience was being targeted?

In this analogy you can see how as a young academic I became beguiled by the prospect of playing a small part in probably the most promising breakthrough in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in one hundred years. Yet, in the intense engagement with the minutiae of negotiations, I lost sight of the bigger picture: that the balance of power was stacked up greatly in Israel’s favor and that the major powers in the international community were committed to the two-state model for an agreement because anything else would raise the even more difficult question – the question of what solution would recognize the injustice that befell the Palestinian refugees in 1948.

Before I come to my conclusions, I have one more thing to say about my involvement in the MEPP. As I said in my introduction, the purpose of these reflections and observations is not to beat my chest in remorse. I can be my own toughest critic

but I know there were some achievements during the past three decades. Some of my work, which I carried out with others, will stand the test of time and I know will form the basis of a negotiated agreement, especially the detailed papers on Jerusalem and the management of the holy sites of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the city. I am also very proud of the fact that scattered around Europe and North America there are PhD students who are doing great work, which I had been able to facilitate through my supervision and my access to scholarship funds. I also know that at critical moments, when the low-level conflict in Jerusalem began to spiral out of control and show signs of enraged inter-ethnic violence, the members of the network of those working on the peace process – Palestinians, Israelis, and internationals like myself – were able to keep a dialogue going, were able to head off or at least dilute the lurch toward polemical rhetoric and extremism and to keep the prospect of a negotiated agreement going as an alternative to blind violence.

Conclusions

As a case study, I think my experience leads me to draw at least three main conclusions that may be useful for others. First, the line between engaged policy work and academic analysis is a line that can indeed be crossed – but you cross it at your peril. Engagement enriches and motivates your research; it gives it a foundation in reality and a relevance that is difficult to obtain otherwise. At the same time, if you wish to understand the picture beyond your own involvement, you need to step back regularly from the fray and reexamine your assumptions.

Second, and this is related to the first, collective work, including research, stretching over many years can lead to “group think.” You end up in a rather comfortable silo of shared values, language, and social networks and can regard contending views as merely disruptive. Often the participants of Track Two discussions share a similar class and a Western educational background which lulled us into a sense of a collective endeavor, when other more subtle dynamics are in play. Academics need to consciously seek out and engage with a variety of approaches in order to strengthen the quality and acuity of their work.

Third, the career structure we have as academics does not sufficiently foster the pursuit of independent thought. Career progression is dependent upon grants awarded, having research accepted for publication by well-respected publishing houses, and the cultivation of networks of influential people. All of these are inherently risk-averse.

In my case, having a wide hinterland to my academic career helped, I believe, to mitigate these dangers – not completely, but to some extent. As a result of my NGO work before becoming an academic, I had a network of friends and former colleagues in the voluntary sector and in Palestinian and Israeli civil society. I also help run a small farm, mucking out barns at the weekend, digging holes for fence posts, milking goats and shearing sheep. The academic life was not my whole life by any means, and this I believe was a great asset in keeping slightly removed from the anxieties around career advancement.

Prospects and Prognosis

Before I finish, in the light of my change of heart regarding the MEPP, I should say something about the prospects of the peace process. Part of our job as political scientists is to make predictions based on an analysis of past and current events. I do not have a particularly good track record on this aspect of my work. For example, I never foresaw the dismantling of the Berlin Wall in 1989. For the life of me, I never thought Nelson Mandela would be released from prison and, then become the president of the state that had imprisoned him. The Arab Spring in 2011 took me, and many others, completely by surprise.

Prior to the events of October 2023, I confidently wrote that I could see no circumstances in which serious negotiations or progress on the core issues dividing the Palestinians and Israeli would take place for at least five to seven years. My view then was that the incentive for the dominant power, Israel, to make any concessions was just not there. In addition, those actors in the international community which could intervene more strongly were too preoccupied with the war in Ukraine, the shifting power dynamics in the Pacific, the climate crisis, and the prospect of Iran developing a nuclear weapon. For its part, the Palestinian leadership was too fragmented and internally divided to be able to offer a coherent and strategic plan of resistance to Israel. I concluded that unless there was a significant change in the balance of power, such as an economic shock for Israel or a military setback, I could see no progress in a negotiated agreement whatsoever before 2030. After that, it would be too difficult to predict anything – so many issues, from demographic change to the impact of new Artificial Intelligence technologies to the impact of climate crisis on the region, would come into play.

Clearly the events of October 2023 have been traumatic in the extreme for both Israel and the Palestinians. Whether they amount to the military setback for Israel that would alter the balance of power is, at the time of writing, too soon to discern. Certainly, the psychological impact of the attack by Hamas has been considerable on the Israeli military and the wider Israeli society. While it can be viewed by Palestinians as a military victory of sorts, its sheer viciousness is possibly, as a result, strategically self-defeating. Israel's corresponding enraged, criminally disproportionate, and merciless response on Gaza civilians through aerial bombardment will not have advanced its security one iota. A kind of madness seems to have descended on the leadership of the nation. Despite professions by influential actors like the United States and some European states that there needs to be a renewed commitment to a two-state solution to the conflict, their complicity in so much death and destruction is likely to push the prospect of such an agreement occurring much further into the distant future. When the dust has settled, the shock to Israel will probably be insufficient to induce it to make the necessary concessions.

Even if the current situation amounts, in effect, to a defeat both for Palestinians of their goal for an independent state and for those Israelis who believed that some accommodation with the Palestinians was possible, nevertheless, the conflict is not

going to go away. A defeat of Hamas in Gaza, if it occurs, will not be the end of the story. A new generation of Palestinians are being galvanized and are finding new ways of expressing their national identity and of mobilizing resistance.¹²

About ten years ago I carried out a comparison of the ways in which the Indigenous populations of New Zealand, Australia, and the United States were continuing their struggle to restore control over their former lands. It was quite remarkable to note the progress that, for example, the Maoris have made in advancing their political and cultural rights in contemporary New Zealand. Similarly, I learned that the Sioux tribes of North Dakota refused financial compensation for the loss of their lands in the Black Hills back in the 1850s and have insisted, instead, on their former lands being returned to them.

The impact of Palestinian dispossession in 1948 has had a different trajectory from these examples, in that their resistance to dispossession has been woven into wider regional and international conflicts. So I do not want to draw too many parallels. But the bottom line we can see from the above examples of ongoing resistance is that dispossession is not the end of a people's story. They do not just take it lying down. The resulting colonial-type occupation is not a stable political situation and requires huge financial, military, and political resources to maintain. In the end, Israel will be confronted once again with the need to address the historical injustice of Palestinian dispossession.

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Endnotes

- 1 See Tom Najem, Michael Molloy, Michael Bell, and John Bell, eds., *Track Two Diplomacy and Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Old City Initiative* (London: Routledge, 2017).
- 2 In 1992, I had just obtained a Ford Foundation grant for research on Jerusalem, which resulted in my first book on Jerusalem: *The Politics of Jerusalem since 1967* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
- 3 Some of the product of this work can be found in: Michael Dumper, "Palestinian Refugees in Comparative Perspectives," in *The Palestinian Refugee Issue*, ed. Eyal Benvenisti, Chaim Gans, Sari Hanafi (Berlin: Max Planck Institute, 2006); Michael Dumper, ed., *Palestinian Refugee Repatriation: Global Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2006); Michael Dumper, "The Return of Palestinian Refugees and Displaced Persons: The Evolution of a European Union Policy on the Middle East Peace Process," in *Palestinian Refugees*, ed. Rex Brynen and Rula al-Rifa'i (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006); and Michael Dumper, *The Future of Palestinian Refugees: Toward Equity and Peace* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2007).
- 4 Michael Dumper, "A False Dichotomy? The Binationalism Debate and the Future of

- Divided Jerusalem,” *International Affairs* 87, no. 3 (May 2011): 671–86.
- 5 See the observations in Robert Hayden and Timothy D. Walker, “Intersecting Religioscapes: A Comparative Approach to Trajectories of Change, Scale, and Competitive Sharing of Religious Spaces,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 2 (June 2013): 399–426; Ron. E. Hassner, *War on Sacred Grounds* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013). These themes are also explored in greater detail in Michael Dumper, ed., *Contested Holy Cities: The Urban Dimension of Religious Conflicts* (London: Routledge, 2019), and Michael Dumper, *Power, Piety, and People: The Politics of Holy Cities in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).
 - 6 See Michael Dumper, “Policing Divided Cities: Stabilization and Law Enforcement in Palestinian East Jerusalem,” *International Affairs* 89, no. 5 (September 2013): 1247–64.
 - 7 A summary of this work can be found in Michael Dumper, *Jerusalem Unbound: Geography, History, and the Future of the Holy City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 224–32.
 - 8 See a very interesting account in Menachem Klein, *A Possible Peace between Israel and Palestine: An Insider’s Account of the Geneva Initiative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
 - 9 See Najem et.al., *Track Two Diplomacy and Jerusalem*, 143ff.
 - 10 An extended version of this comparison between the Geneva Initiative and JOCI can be found in Dumper, *Jerusalem Unbound*, 200–212.
 - 11 This conference resulted in a publication: Susan Akram, Michael Dumper, Michael Lynk and Iain Scobbie, eds., *International Law and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: A Rights-based Approach to Middle East Peace* (London: Routledge, 2011).
 - 12 I examine this issue in Michael Dumper, “Refugee Entitlement and the Passing of Time: Waldron’s Supersession Thesis and the Palestinian Refugee Case Sixty Years On,” in *Forced Migration, Reconciliation, and Justice*, ed. Megan Bradley (Montreal: McGill and Queen’s University Press, 2014).