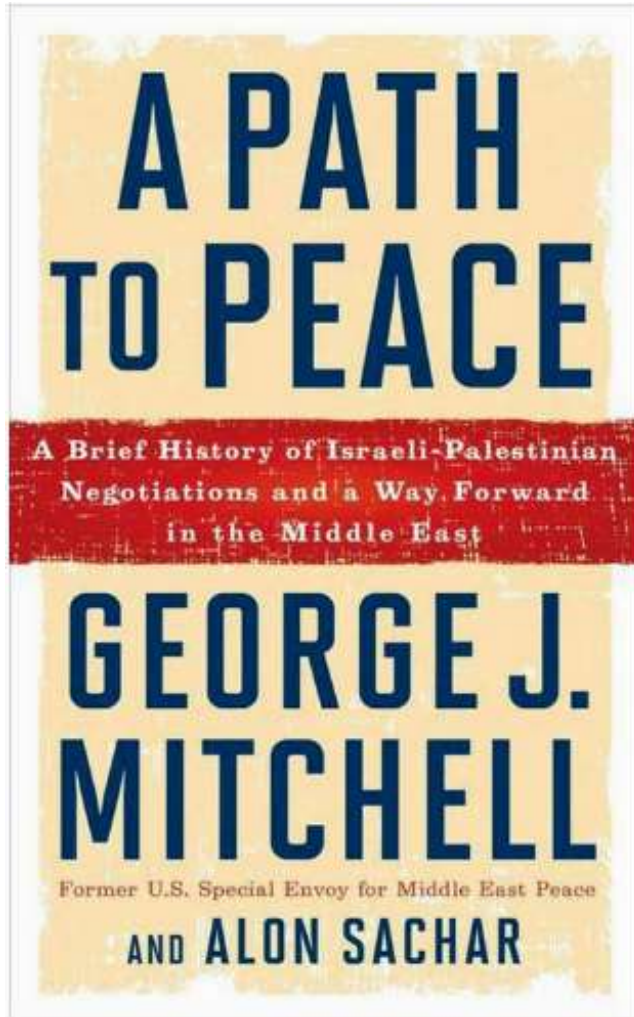


# We need to understand past to shape future

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*“A Path to Peace: A Brief History of Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations and a Way Forward in the Middle East,”* by George J. Mitchell and Alon Sachar. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016, 272 pages, \$26.



“The complexity of the Middle East is illustrated by the tangle of our relationships there in 2016,” George J. Mitchell and Alon Sachar explain near the beginning of “A Path to Peace: A Brief History of Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations and a Way Forward in the Middle East,” their new roadmap for resolving the conflict that has plagued this region of the world for decades.

“We oppose the Assad regime in Syria, and we also oppose ISIS, which is fighting the Assad regime. The Syrian Kurds join us in opposing ISIS, but are being attacked by Turkey, one of our allies. We also combat ISIS in Iraq, where we are joined by Shia militias who are supported by Iran, whom we oppose. In Afghanistan we oppose the Taliban, who receive some support from Pakistan, another of our allies. Pakistan meanwhile has fought several wars with India, another of our allies.”

Early on in this extraordinary treatise on how relations can potentially be normalized between the key players in this global imbroglio, we learn why the task at hand is so immensely complicated. For better or worse, the West has assumed a dominant role in the Middle East for the last century or so. As such, the West, and particularly the United States, must assume

some responsibility for resolving the deeply entrenched disagreements that have characterized the Israeli-Palestinian relationship since the official creation of the State of Israel in 1948.

“A Path to Peace” is extensively researched, with 22 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction and 10 chapters that comprise the main text. The language is clear, unambiguous and projects an authority not found in similar efforts by those who are not as intimately familiar with the subject matter Mitchell and Sachar know all too well. They make a pretty good team to tackle the quest for peace in the Middle East; certainly, they are very familiar with how the situation has evolved over the years and how the various cultures tend to view each other with suspicion and mistrust. What I like most about this collaboration, however, is the focus – the authors never seem to favor one perspective over another when it comes to the concrete actions they feel must be taken to achieve a lasting peace. They simply present the facts and then proceed to lay out what must be done to make the proposed resolution a reality.

The bulk of “A Path to Peace” is spent bringing the reader up to speed regarding how we arrived at the present moment in time. The authors’ overriding premise seems to be that only by

understanding the past can we interpret the present and potentially shape the future. But as is usually the case, what is easy to explain rationally from one angle often misses the full implications for others enmeshed in the overall scenario. In a charged environment where trust levels, for very legitimate reasons, are consistently low, hidden agendas can exacerbate paranoia and suspicion.

Consider the following excerpt from “Moving in Opposite Directions,” the third chapter and one I found particularly enlightening:

“With respect to the Palestinian issue, however, a gap has developed between Israel and its major allies. The occupation has lasted for a half century and it has been humiliating for the Palestinians on an individual level and as a people. Israeli security measures in Palestinian territories – checkpoints, roadblocks, and the like – serve to protect Israel. But many of those measures are also in place to protect settlers scattered through the West Bank and have had an adverse effect on the Palestinian economy, restricting their movement and their access to lands for agriculture and for other purposes.”

Mitchell was a U.S. senator from Maine from 1980 to 1995. He was the Democratic majority leader from 1989 to 1995 and the primary architect of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement for peace in Northern Ireland. He also served as U.S. Special Envoy for Middle East Peace.

The recipient of a Presidential Medal of Freedom, his previous books include *The Negotiator: A Memoir*, *Making Peace*, and *Not for America Alone: The Triumph of Democracy and the Fall of Communism*. Sachar is an attorney who has served as an adviser to the U.S. ambassador to Israel and to President Obama’s Special Envoys for Middle East Peace. In the mid-2000s, he worked for the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs.

With respect to their proposed plan for achieving peace between Israel and the Palestinians, Mitchell and Sachar provide a framework which they claim represents the bottom line conditions that must be met in order for an accord to be codified. First, the authors feel that so-called binationalism simply will not work in the disputed region. In other words, a partition between the Israelis and the Palestinians is inevitable. Second, some agreement must be reached as to what is meant by a “two-state conclusion.” The authors make a convincing case that one of the biggest obstacles to achieving a lasting peace is that the Israelis and the Palestinians have two entirely different conceptions of what a two-state solution should look like. Until a way is found to get them on the same page, so-to-speak, there is very little chance that meaningful progress can be made.

Finally, Mitchell and Sachar assert that the main thrust of any future negotiations must revolve around identifying and pursuing concrete incentives for both sides to find common ground in the pursuit of peaceful coexistence.

To date, differences have been so pronounced, and mistrust so rampant, that neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians possess the threshold level of motivation necessary to precipitate a lasting, mutually-beneficial arrangement. It should be noted that simply having a desire to end the bloodshed that has characterized the Israeli-Palestinian relationship for decades is insufficient to bring about peace.

Even if the parties approve an official peace plan, violence will no doubt continue in the region due to the inevitable influence of myriad intervening factors operating in virtually every part of the Middle East.

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