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From the Baltimore Sun

Israeli, Palestinian work together

Q&A: Edy Kaufman and Manuel Hassassian

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University of Maryland researchers Edy Kaufman and Manuel Hassassian know something about negotiations. One Israeli, the other Palestinian, they sat down and figured out how to teach a class on the Middle East together.

"This arrangement has been difficult at times, but we have learned to make it work," says Hassassian, the Palestinian ambassador to the U.K. and former rector of Bethlehem University in the West Bank. "We see the project as an experiment in conflict resolution, moving from adversarial discourses about the past."

Kaufman, a longtime professor at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, concurs. "We agree about many things, disagree about others. But we begin with a deep, mutual respect and we bring that to the classroom," he says.

They have been team teaching a summer course - Conflict Resolution: The Israeli-Palestinian Experiment- at College Park since 1993 under the auspices of the university's Center for International Development and Conflict Management, only missing 2000 when Hassassian led the Jerusalem Task Force for the Palestinian negotiators trying to reach a settlement at Camp David.

They answered questions last week a few minutes before beginning another session of this year's course that is taking place as violence escalates throughout their region.

We now have this intense conflict in Lebanon added to instability in Iraq and Afghantistan and the ongoing dispute with Iran over its nuclear program. Doesn't this mean that solving the Israeli-Palestinian issue is not the critical element to peace in the Middle East that it once seemed to be?

Edy Kaufman - From my perspective as an Israeli, the real issue at stake for us is the conflict with the Palestinians. The true conflict before 1948 was two communities fighting over one piece of land. Now, with Israel signing peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, that is the one that is left, peace with Syria being of secondary importance. If it were resolved, if the Palestinians had a state, it would open the way for Israel to be recognized by the entire Arab League. So, for us, there is no question that is the key issue. Unfortunately, in these latest events, the fighting in Lebanon, you can see the way Hezbollah has hijacked the international focus, distracting from the Palestinian dimension in the region, let alone the suffering that the Palestinians now endure.

Manuel Hassassian - It is a given that the crux of the problem in the Middle East has always been the Palestinian issue. The essence of the conflict in the region is the question of the Palestinians. That said, I want

to make clear that the Palestinians have nothing to do with Hezbollah or what they are doing in southern Lebanon. Hezbollah has its own political agenda and it is abusing the Palestinian problem for its own interests. So when we talk about Middle East conflict - regardless of Israel's war in Lebanon or its peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan - the Palestinian dimension will always make it possible to create instability unless it is resolved.

Does the Lebanon war mean that the Palestinian issue has been forced into the background? Before the fighting started there, most of the focus was on the Gaza Strip.

Hassassian - Let me make clear that I do sympathize with the Lebanese and totally denounce what Israel is doing in Lebanon. But from my own selfish point of view as a Palestinian, they have hijacked our problem, our 40-year fight for our independence. The killing in Gaza is still going on. So this is hurting our cause.

Kaufman - To bring some context to this, there are serious allegations that the Iranians are connected to Hezbollah's actions, that the Syrians are. And they definitely have their own agendas - Iran to defuse criticism of its nuclear program, Syria because of the assassination of [former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik] Hariri. Hezbollah themselves have been under the spotlight of the UN because how can you have ministers in a government and at the same time have a private armed force that does not even consult with that government's army? So they have their own agendas and problems and find it useful to use the real issue, which is the suffering of the Palestinian people, for their own benefit.

So you would say that resolving the Israeli-Palestinian question would lead to a wider relaxation of tensions in the region?

Kaufman -To put it into context, look at the question of the Golan Heights, which are claimed by Syria. There is actually not a lot of pressure on Israel to withdraw from there. Very few people live there. Before the 1967 war, when Syria had it, it was mainly a military area. The largest city, Kunetra, there has already been given back to Syria in Kissinger's mediated separation-of-forces agreement. The pressure on Israel is because of the West Bank and Gaza. The reason is that that is not only a territorial issue, a border dispute, it is a human rights issue. It is 3 million people who do not enjoy their rights, who live in misery. The world cares more about people than about border disputes. It used to be that when we spoke of the Middle East conflict, we meant the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. Today, there are other disputes, between the Shiite and the Sunni, things within Lebanon and Iraq, that have nothing to do with Israel. But within those conflicts, you find people using and abusing the Palestinian issue for their own interests.

Hassassian - The only nation that will give Israel its legitimacy in the Middle East is not Egypt, it is not Jordan, it is the Palestinians. Once the Palestinians have their rights recognized by Israel, that would open the way to a new Middle East that would have a sustainable peace because Israel would be accepted by the Arab world. So solving that problem would facilitate a process of reconciliation not only with Israel, but between Arab countries as well. For instance, many of those internal tensions in Iraq are a reaction to the fact that people are opposed to the United States policy in the Middle East. If America was playing a different role in solving the Palestinian issue, it would reduce the tensions elsewhere.

Kaufman - Yes, if it would be possible to reach an Israeli-Palestinan peace, it would accelerate the process of democracy in the Middle East, which is supposed to be the main interest of the United States. The Israelis have a democracy and the Palestinians now have a democracy, even if you might not like the way they have chosen, with Hamas. The new democracies in Iraq and Lebanon have no real problem with Israel. Reconciling Israel and the Palestinians would be the way to promote true democracy.

So what should the United States be doing about the Israeli-Palestinian issue?

Kaufman - I worry mostly because of the absence of a U.S. presence in the Middle East. In the Israeli-Palestinian context it was clear in the past, when the United States did some good work, that there was a need for presidential involvement. Look at what Jimmy Carter did in bringing together Israel and Egypt. And look at the role played by President Clinton. He was so involved and he nearly made it. It didn't work that time, but he would be welcomed back as an American mediator on the issue by both sides one day. But look at the current administration. President Bush seems unwilling or unable or uninterested in becoming personally involved. You just cannot compare the shuttle diplomacy of Secretary of State [Condoleezza] Rice with what Henry Kissinger did in the region. She goes there one day and comes back the next with nothing. It is really kind of shameful that now that there is only one superpower that the United States seems not to understand the dimensions of this problem and how necessary it is to get involved there.

Hassassian - Everybody knows that the only power that can have any real effect on the peace process is the United States. . Bush has never personalized the issue beyond giving uneqivocal support to Israel. Not only has he not solved the problem, he has exacerbated it, raising the level of hatred of the United States in the Middle East among those who support the Palestinians. If the United States is to gain back its credibility in the region, it must become more proactive. America is the only country that has the power to lead an international coalition to stop the conflict in Lebanon, stop the conflict in Gaza, and bring the parties back to the negotiating table.

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