
Peace in the Middle East: Lessons from a Legend

Daniel L. Shapiro

Introduction

I recently spoke with a colleague in the field of negotiation and shared with her the sad news that Roger Fisher had died. Her face dampened as she said: "I didn't know that legends die." But in fact, I do not believe they do. Roger Fisher is a legend, a true icon in the field of negotiation and conflict resolution. Moreover, while he himself is gone, his legend and good works live on through his writing, teaching, and mentorship. He inspired generations of conflict resolution scholars and practitioners, and the essential concepts he articulated in his books and papers have proven themselves eminently useful and have become standards of practice around the world.

Roger's death was a personal loss for me as well. We worked together for more than a decade and he was colleague, mentor, coauthor, and close friend. A distinct memory is arriving to work and seeing Roger at his desk, typing a carefully crafted letter of advice to some world leader about some important issue. This was his habit. He would not read the morning newspaper to find out about the world. He would read it to figure out what conflict he might do something about *that day*. By 9:15 a.m., the two of us would be sitting side-by-side in front of his computer, refining negotiation theory and vigorously converting it into practical advice. By mid-morning, the letter would be in the mail.

Roger's knack for bridging theory and practice is brilliantly captured in a short book he wrote in 1972 called *Dear Israelis, Dear Arabs: A Working Approach to Peace*. This lesser known of his books is, to me, a hidden gem; it provides a particularly powerful lens into Roger's theoretical mind and how he put his ideas to practical use. The book consists of six letters that

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he wrote in the summer of 1971, along with a general memorandum describing his basic approach for dealing with conflicts in the Middle East. Each letter offers tailored advice directed toward a specific, influential decision maker, including Egyptian, Israeli, Palestinian, Jordanian, American, and United Nations officials.

In his writing and teaching, Roger stressed the importance of knowing your purpose — whether in conflict resolution or in writing an article. (See William Ury’s article on page 133.) So, in true Roger fashion, let me describe the threefold purpose of *this* article. First, I illuminate five of the many negotiation principles Roger articulated in *Dear Israelis, Dear Arabs* (Fisher 1972). These “Fisher Principles,” as I call them, foreshadow seminal contributions encapsulated in his later publications. Second, I discuss the impact of Roger’s insights in moving forward peace processes in the Middle East. This commentary illustrates the continued relevance — indeed, the striking need — for Roger’s practical theories as political stalemate persists in the Middle East some forty years after the book’s publication. I close with personal reflections on what Roger meant to me.

Furthering International Peace: The Fisher Principles

In *Dear Israelis, Dear Arabs*, Roger formulated a variety of principles for effectively negotiating international conflict — the reader familiar with Roger’s subsequent work will quickly recognize them. In what follows, I draw attention to five such principles that Roger revisited again and again in his writing, teaching, and international consultation. I term this nonexclusive catalog of concepts the “Fisher Principles.”

Start with the Goal in Mind: Peace, Not Victory

In *Dear Israelis, Dear Arabs*, Roger urged officials in the Middle East to be clear about their goals in the conflict. Disputants often attempt to “win” a conflict — to reach victory *over* the other. Roger reminded disputants that their goal was not to win the conflict but to end it. He observed that disputants often place “too much emphasis on short-term victories and not enough on establishing a long-term peaceful relationship” (64).

In his letter to a Palestinian official, Roger proposed that even military action can be done in the service of peace, not victory. He suggested that, *should* the Palestinian leadership decide to engage in violence, they might consider engaging in a military program narrowly directed at the destruction of carefully selected Israeli structures in occupied territories, which were presumably part of Israel’s strategic expansion. Such action would call attention to the Palestinian grievance over settlement development while minimizing both loss of life and limb as well as any international critiques over the illegitimacy of military action.

Recognize that Peace Is a Process

Process matters. Roger viewed peace not as an endpoint but as a process of dealing nonviolently with differences. So what processes, then, are most conducive to positive, productive relations? Roger recognized that a debate over history or moral culpability is a dead end. While history shapes an ethnopolitical group's identity narrative, each side in a conflict tends to believe that history is on *their side*. Arguing about whose history is "right" or who is to blame tends to instill hostility and adversarial relations, not long-term peace. Furthermore, clinging to fixed positions is only likely to further sour relations. As Roger noted, "a publicly stated position may have been thought of as a negotiating position that was padded with plenty of fat. Over time that fat tends to turn to bone. A subsequent position will be judged less on its merits than by the degree to which it departs from the original position" (18). Roger suggests that a better process involves a transformation in the nature of the relationship from adversaries to friends.

Convert Adversaries into Friends

One of Roger's most deeply held principles was the power of turning an adversary into a colleague. In *Dear Israelis, Dear Arabs*, he offered this advice in a letter to an Israeli official. He argued the rational merits of this principle — including the benefits of exerting energy toward building a better future rather than scoring short-term victories — and discussed operational approaches for fostering intercommunal friendship. A key, he argued, is to work toward normalization of relations. For example, Roger suggested to an Egyptian official that the Egyptian government contact Air France to lay the groundwork for a daily roundtrip flight between Cairo and Tel Aviv, which would come into effect upon Israel's military withdrawal from the Sinai.

Combine Rigorous Analysis with Simple, Operational Advice

Roger had a distinctive approach to consultation, as evidenced in *Dear Israelis, Dear Arabs*. He would identify current processes for coping with a conflict, analyze their strengths and deficiencies, and suggest strategies and tactics to improve the process.

Among Roger's most important contributions to conflict analysis was his concept of *fractionating* a conflict — breaking up "the" conflict into its many components. In *Dear Israelis, Dear Arabs*, he demonstrated the power of this tool. He described what was commonly understood in the early 1970s as the necessary process to secure a peace agreement in the Middle East: Ambassador Gunnar Jarring, the United Nation's Special Representative for the Middle East Peace Process, would need to meet separately with the region's political leadership, arrange some face-to-face meetings, and culminate the process with the formal signing of a peace agreement which, according to this thinking, would settle the conflict. (Indeed, direct, face-to-face dialogue is commonly assumed today as the

necessary and sufficient process for producing long-term peace between Israelis and Palestinians.)

However, Roger asked whether this process would meet with success in the case of the Arab-Israeli conflict. “The answer,” he responds, “unfortunately, must be no” (13). Roger then fractionated “the” single Arab-Israeli conflict into its many component conflicts, showing just how many problems needed to be addressed in order to create lasting peace. This “to-do list” stretches across nearly four pages in the book and includes elements of a package deal ranging from an agreement between Egypt and Israel defining the final Sinai boundary and extent of demilitarized zones to the various necessary agreements between Israel and Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt, to an agreement among the four states on the Gulf of Aqaba (Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt) defining the substantive rights of ships and airplanes in and over the Gulf, to an agreement with the World Bank and nations agreeing to contribute to the international development fund for Palestinians, and to an agreement between Israel and all the Arab states participating in the Arab boycott of companies conducting business in Israel to formally accept the existence of Israel, live in peace together, and officially end the boycott (14). Roger’s point was to highlight that, as with other large-scale conflicts, the Arab-Israeli conflict was not a single conflict, but many. Understanding its complexity is necessary to craft well-honed advice.

Roger had a deep understanding of how the human mind works in situations of conflict. While academics are often expected to analyze the complexities of their subject matter, Roger also realized the limitations of complexity. Human behavior is more amenable to change when we are presented with simple, operational nuggets of advice. (See Andrea Kupfer-Schneider’s article on page 171.) As such, he created the concept of a “yesable proposition,” a realistic, sufficient, operational proposal to which a decision maker is likely to say “yes.” (See James Sebenius’s article on page 159.)

In *Dear Israelis, Dear Arabs*, Roger offers an elegant example of a yesable proposition. In the early 1970s, Egypt had a policy of “no direct negotiations” with Israel. However, this raised the problem of how the two sides would ever make peace. In a letter to an Egyptian official, Roger proposed that Egypt differentiate its strict policy of “no negotiations” from “meetings at the United Nations, with third parties present, for the purpose of implementing Resolution 242” (41). The latter, a yesable proposition, would allow Egypt to keep to its policy of “no negotiations” while defining the kinds of meetings in which it *was* open to participating.

Face the Problem Side by Side

Dear Israelis, Dear Arabs does more than just offer useful ideas. It illustrates how Roger approached the process of *delivering* advice. Just as he

encouraged disputants to face their conflict side by side as a shared problem, his letters invite the reader to sit side by side with him and consider the utility of his ideas. The tone of his writing is strong but respectful, suggestive but nonimposing, humble but forthcoming. He used the conditional voice rather than the imperative, thus suggesting what one “might” do rather than what one “must” do. Moreover, while he did not shy away from sharing his perspective, he consistently recognized his own fallibility. All of these factors give the text the feel not of an authoritative guide but rather of a sophisticated draft of ideas with which the reader can engage.

The final page of *Dear Israelis, Dear Arabs* further underscores Roger’s collaborative nature. “So far,” he states, “you have been looking over my shoulder at various ideas and suggestions given to people actively and officially concerned with the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, officials are not the only ones who make a difference . . . What are you going to do about it?” He leaves the final pages of the book blank, so the reader can develop his or her own thinking on what to do next about the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Roger’s Impact

The impact of Roger’s work in the Middle East has been tremendous. Consider three brief examples. First, Roger’s work on *Dear Israelis, Dear Arabs* laid the groundwork for a public television documentary series he coproduced in 1975 called *Arabs and Israelis*. The series examined prospects for peace in the Middle East and was initially shown in Israel and Jordan. Prior to its debut in Egypt, President Anwar Sadat privately screened the emotionally powerful segment on *Two Families*. Egyptian Ambassador Tahseen Bashir, who joined the president for the screening, later reported that Sadat was so moved by the documentary that he called the situation a tragedy and said he should go to Jerusalem. Within a couple of weeks, Sadat went public with the idea, setting the stage for his historic trip (Patton 2013).

Second, through my own research and facilitation efforts in the Middle East, I have seen firsthand the impact of Roger’s ideas on public and private processes of conflict management. I recently cofacilitated a set of private meetings between influential Israelis and Palestinians familiar with Roger’s work and witnessed as the group honed in on operational processes for breaking the current political impasse. I could feel Roger’s influence as the discussion moved toward ways of avoiding positional bargaining, working toward mutual understanding at both the political and public levels, and devising “yesable processes” for jumpstarting intergroup dialogue.

Finally, key negotiators in the Middle East have confirmed Roger’s impact. I recently asked Dr. Saeb Erakat, Chief Palestinian Negotiator, for his perspectives on the impact Roger had on him (Erakat 2013). Erakat responded:

Roger Fisher was not just about *Dear Israelis, Dear Arabs*. He was about Arabs and Israelis abandoning their anger, claims, hate, and hostility — or at least controlling it. My first lesson about Israelis came from Roger Fisher — that my understanding their fears, concerns, and the way they see around them does not mean my acceptance. It means to me the need to abandon the squares of zero sums, to win-win. Ever since I read Roger Fisher's work, my world has no longer been divided between pro-Israelis or pro-Arabs; it is divided between those who are pro-peace and those against it. The second lesson I learnt from Professor Fisher as a Palestinian and an Arab was that it is cheaper to negotiate in pain and frustration for five years than to exchange bullets for five minutes.

Appreciating a Legend

Re-reading *Dear Israelis, Dear Arabs* has brought back many memories of Roger. One stands out. We shared an office until the final days of his full retirement from academia. The last paper I saw him write was entitled, "Lessons from My Life." It was a two-page paper, double spaced and in big font, on the power of appreciation. He believed that everyone wants to feel heard, deeply understood, and valued for their perspectives, and he lived by those principles. I saw how he worked to appreciate the perspectives of both Israelis and Palestinians — and helped them bridge their own gaps in mutual understanding. And over the years, even when he and I held opposing points of view about how to teach a class or express a concept, his goal was always to appreciate. I always felt valued. I was not alone. I remember watching him meet with a first-year Harvard college student who was excited at the chance to meet the legend. And how did Roger start off the meeting? He asked this young student for thoughts on how to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Within minutes, the two of them were engaged in a hearty, practical conversation.

Throughout his career as one of the world's most effective mediators and facilitators, Roger embodied the value of appreciation. And perhaps that is the essence of his effectiveness. Soon before his full retirement from academia, he and I sat in a café discussing options for negotiating the crisis of the day. And as he leaned forward and shared his thoughts, I felt exhilarated to be sitting next to this legend and to have the opportunity to learn from his insights. I decided to share with him some of the ways in which I — and countless others — have been inspired by him and his work. He helped invent the modern field of negotiation through more than 50 years of scholarship, teaching, and practice. Beyond the Arab-Israeli conflict, he also offered critical advice in such conflicts as the Ecuador-Peru border dispute, the transition from apartheid in South Africa, and the Iranian hostage crisis (see Bruce Patton's article elsewhere in this issue), among many others. As I described the ways he has inspired generations, the aging

Roger Fisher beamed back in gratitude, and moments later our conversation raced off in new directions to come up with ideas about what could be done to stop the impasse in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

REFERENCES

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