

Nov 04, 2016 by [Gordon Robison](#)

Dialogue of the Deaf ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

Based on the newspaper reports from Morocco it sounds as though the Forum for the Future did not go especially well. The Forum, which was probably Colin Powell's final overseas trip as secretary of state, brought together foreign ministers and other senior figures from the United States, a number of European nations, 20 Arab nations, Turkey and Afghanistan.

Washington arrived at the meeting hoping to promote economic and, to a lesser extent, political reform in the Middle East. Arab participants emphasized the need for the West to focus first and foremost on a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"Reform has to go on. A child needs an education now," Powell told the meeting.

"For far too long," countered the long-serving Saudi Arabian foreign minister, Prince Saud Al-Faisal, "the Arabs have witnessed the Western bias toward Israel."

So, all in all, it was a pretty unsurprising event. Americans and Arabs talking past one another with the Europeans caught somewhere in the middle.

This conference has been the subject of increasingly bitter debate since the beginning of the year. That was when a draft paper on Middle East reform leaked into the Arab press. The paper, a working document prepared ahead of last summer's G8 summit, called for a new initiative in which the US and European nations would join forces to promote political and economic reform throughout the Middle East.

The basic idea behind the plan was sound: according to a report prepared for the United Nations by Arab experts the Arab world lags much of the rest of the planet in terms of literacy, education, internet access and the development of democratic institutions. The G8 proposal in its original form urged the West to address these concerns out of sheer self-interest. These problems, it noted, breed terrorism and spawn illegal immigration, mainly to Europe.

Unfortunately the draft document made no substantive mention of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a fact Arab critics seized on and used to denounce the proposals. What was finally presented to the summit was a substantially revised document that paid more attention to Israel/Palestine. The next stage, this weekend's conference in Rabat, emphasized economic aid over political reform.

Leaving the Palestinian question out of the original draft was a mistake. I've heard the argument that it was an internal working document. True. But these things usually leak out sooner or later, and the absence of at least a bow to the Arab-Israeli conflict was bound to cause problems. That said, autocratic regimes throughout the region have spent decades using the conflict as an excuse for not putting their own houses in order. Arabs and Jews have

spent a century quarrelling over the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. There's no earthly reason why women in Yemen, where the female literacy rate is something like 10%, should be denied access to literacy programs until the Israelis and Palestinians make peace. For an American audience that last statement sounds absurdly self-evident, but just that argument – everything else on hold until the Palestine conflict is solved – was the crux of the Arab League secretary general's reaction to the original American proposals.

There's no question that serious progress must be made on the Israeli-Palestinian front: it is a festering sore, poisoning relations between the Arab world and the west. But the Arab world has a lot of other problems as well. Humanitarian concerns, as well as self-interest, compel the West to move forward on those fronts too, even if that requires dragging some Arab governments along in the process.

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