

Martin Indyk, Tireless U.S. Envoy Who Saw the ‘Promised Land’ Ending the Israel-Palestinian Conflict

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Jul 28, 2024

Also published in Haaretz

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Articles & Testimony

After spending decades working for a breakthrough, he was never naive about the rejectionists on both sides, but he still had faith in a two-state solution.

Martin Indyk, my friend, colleague and partner in Mideast peace efforts for decades, passed away this week, leaving the region poorer for his absence after so long advocating to improve its future. [His commitment to peace in the Middle East \(https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/2024-07-25/ty-article/.premium/american-jewish-diplomat-and-former-u-s-envoy-to-israel-martin-indyk-dies-at-73/00000190-ead0-dd5f-af93-fbd09a2f0000\)](https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/2024-07-25/ty-article/.premium/american-jewish-diplomat-and-former-u-s-envoy-to-israel-martin-indyk-dies-at-73/00000190-ead0-dd5f-af93-fbd09a2f0000) was deep, as was his commitment to Israel. He and I shared a passion for Israel and a desire for it not just to have peace with its neighbors, but to flourish. He always believed that America’s interests in the Middle East were served by a strong Israel and a strong U.S.-Israeli relationship.

It was that belief that fostered our relationship when we first met in 1983. Martin had come from Australia and was working at AIPAC when we met. I was in the Pentagon in an era when the conventional wisdom in much of the national security establishment was that our relationship with Israel cost us with the Arabs and in the Middle East.

That was certainly the view of then U.S. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger. U.S. President Ronald Reagan and his [Secretary of State George Shultz \(https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2016-02-21/ty-article/.premium/george-shultz-reminds-us-of-israels-greatness/0000017f-db19-d3a5-af7f-fbbf03090000\)](https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2016-02-21/ty-article/.premium/george-shultz-reminds-us-of-israels-greatness/0000017f-db19-d3a5-af7f-fbbf03090000)

had a different view of Israel, seeing it as more of an asset than a liability, but their view did not permeate the State Department, the Pentagon, or the intelligence community at that time.

Martin saw Israel as the only democracy in the region, which made it a natural partner of the U.S., bound to always align with us. He saw the relationship through shared values and interests, and we bonded over this view and the

view that although the region might not be ripe for peace, we would take on the challenge to help change that.

When I joined the National Security Council staff in the Reagan Administration and then became a senior aide to [U.S. Secretary of State James Baker \(https://www.haaretz.com/2010-03-18/ty-article/james-bakers-advice-for-obama-on-forging-middle-east-peace/0000017f-f12c-df98-a5ff-f3ad6a8f0000\)](https://www.haaretz.com/2010-03-18/ty-article/james-bakers-advice-for-obama-on-forging-middle-east-peace/0000017f-f12c-df98-a5ff-f3ad6a8f0000) in the Bush Administration, I would see Martin often. Always a policy person, Martin helped found the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in 1985 and make it into an influential center for thinking on Arab-Israeli issues. He was constantly generating insights, and I would often sound him out on ideas, especially in the aftermath of [the first Gulf War \(https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2021-01-17/ty-article-magazine/.premium/gas-masks-safe-rooms-and-saddam-hussein-thirty-years-since-the-gulf-war/0000017f-e6c1-d62c-a1ff-fefba5520000\)](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2021-01-17/ty-article-magazine/.premium/gas-masks-safe-rooms-and-saddam-hussein-thirty-years-since-the-gulf-war/0000017f-e6c1-d62c-a1ff-fefba5520000). He was a very strong supporter of our efforts to use the American defeat of Iraq and its expulsion from Kuwait to transform the landscape of the Middle East for peacemaking. We shared that vision and discussed the potential for change I saw after accompanying Baker on eight trips in eight months to the region, [culminating in the Madrid conference \(https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2021-10-22/ty-article/.premium/the-30th-anniversary-of-the-madrid-peace-conference/0000017f-e769-d62c-a1ff-ff7b2f230000\)](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2021-10-22/ty-article/.premium/the-30th-anniversary-of-the-madrid-peace-conference/0000017f-e769-d62c-a1ff-ff7b2f230000). Madrid was a watershed diplomatic moment as Israel not only began bilateral negotiations with Syria, Lebanon, Jordan (to include a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation) but also took part in multilateral working groups that brought it into discussions with a dozen Arab states.

Martin briefed Bill Clinton during his campaign, and when Clinton was elected, was appointed to the senior Middle East position at the White House. By then Yitzhak Rabin had become Israel's prime minister, and he had a new strategic view of the region: he saw Iran becoming Israel's biggest threat within a decade and believed that with the American defeat of Iraq, there was not just an opportunity, but a need to make peace with what he called the "inner circle" of Israel's neighbors in advance of that. Martin described the new realities in the region to Clinton, including Rabin's determination to make peace, and he told Clinton that during his first term four peace treaties were possible. Clinton told him that he [wanted to make that happen \(https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/2018-05-10/ty-article/bill-clinton-the-chaver-who-almost-brought-peace/0000017f-f676-d887-a7ff-fef690ee0000\)](https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/2018-05-10/ty-article/bill-clinton-the-chaver-who-almost-brought-peace/0000017f-f676-d887-a7ff-fef690ee0000).

Although I had been part of Baker's inner circle, Martin lobbied to have me asked to stay at the State Department. He arranged for me to join the group briefing Clinton before his initial meeting as president with Rabin, and no one was happier than Martin when Clinton's Secretary of State Warren Christopher and Clinton asked me to become the American peace envoy. It is impossible to overstate how closely Martin and I worked together.

We were not responsible for [the Oslo process \(https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/2023-09-14/ty-article/.premium/30-years-later-palestinians-feel-all-that-remains-of-the-oslo-accords-are-its-mistakes/0000018a-8999-dd09-a3ba-fdbd60e10000\)](https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/2023-09-14/ty-article/.premium/30-years-later-palestinians-feel-all-that-remains-of-the-oslo-accords-are-its-mistakes/0000018a-8999-dd09-a3ba-fdbd60e10000), but were determined to try to make something of it. We understood Rabin's logic that you make peace with your enemies, not your friends. Key to this was to build in security arrangements as an insurance policy against the unknowns—and, at a minimum, that required the U.S. commitment to Israel to be unshakeable. Much like Clinton, who came to revere Rabin, we, too, saw in him a leader who never shied away from making hard decisions. We were both also struck by what seemed to be Rabin's operating premise: he must always be able to look in the faces of Israeli mothers and be able to say that if war proved necessary, he had done everything he could to avoid that by trying to make peace.

Clinton appointed Martin U.S. ambassador to Israel, which he saw as a culmination of his belief in the Israel-U.S. relationship. No position meant more to him. It was Martin who would call from the hospital to tell me Rabin had died after being shot shortly before it was officially announced.

It's no secret that what Martin felt [for Rabin \(https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-11-07/ty-article/.premium/commemoration-of-rabin-murder-exposes-a-wound-still-festering/00000184-4ec1-df34-a9b6-6ecfadee0000\)](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-11-07/ty-article/.premium/commemoration-of-rabin-murder-exposes-a-wound-still-festering/00000184-4ec1-df34-a9b6-6ecfadee0000), he would never feel for Benjamin Netanyahu. Where he saw constancy in Rabin, he saw

maneuvering in Netanyahu. In Martin's eyes, Rabin's commitments were sacrosanct, Netanyahu's situational and not reliable. Moreover, he felt that Netanyahu's political self-interests always took precedence over everything else, including U.S. needs and concerns.

Their relationship was never particularly good, although Martin, years later as U.S. peace envoy, tried hard to work with him. He even told me at one point in 2014 that he saw Netanyahu struggling to make decisions that were clearly hard for him.

Over the years, Martin established close relations with leaders throughout the Middle East. They respected his insights, judgment, and commitment—knowing he would call it as he saw it, alternately lauding or critical, but always trying to move things in a more positive direction.

It was that desire to find a way to make things better that drove us both. Neither of us had any illusions about the difficulties of making peace, nor were either of us ever naive.

Martin might have been critical of the Israeli right, and especially of their settlement policies, which he saw as designed to prevent a Palestinian state and make the Palestinians feel powerless. But that did not mean that he was soft on the importance of holding the Palestinians both responsible and accountable. That said, he was sensitive to Palestinians who would tell him that the Israelis often acted as if "they did not see us." He saw them. He knew they were not going anywhere.

This informed why we both favored two states for two peoples. It's also why we both thought those on the Israeli right who maintained the situation could be frozen indefinitely on Israel's terms were entirely divorced from reality.

This, in Martin's eyes, was the fatal mistake of the Israeli critics of Oslo: they never offered an alternative and acted as if Israel never had to act. They mistakenly argued the Palestinians would accept their inferior status and rights within Israel.

He always saw as a mistake that Israeli leaders did not do enough to build up Palestinian moderates. That, of course, does not explain October 7, the work of extremist, rejectionist Hamas, which throughout the 1990s would always carry out bombings whenever we were making progress. Their aim: to prevent progress toward peace and to prevent two states—they, too, favored one state, but one they would dominate.

The shock and trauma of October 7 will make it difficult to advance toward two states any time soon. Israelis fear Hamas represents the ethos and identity of Palestinians, who they increasingly believe are driven by resistance and rejection and not co-existence. They fear a Palestinian state would be dominated by Hamas or extremists like it. Meanwhile, much of the rest of the world sees the terrible suffering of this war in Gaza and in Israel as demanding a fundamental change and sees the answer as the two state solution.

Martin to his very last days still favored two states for two peoples—as do I. But I know, and Martin agreed, that before that proves possible, Palestinians must demonstrate that they reject Hamas and renounce violence and accept Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people.

I believe Palestinians are a people with a right to self-determination, but that right can only be exercised after the Palestinians demonstrate they will fulfill their responsibilities not only in words but in action. Should they do so, Israel must respond and not allow messianic nationalists like Ministers [Itamar Ben-Gvir](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-06-13/ty-article-magazine/.premium/how-national-security-minister-ben-gvir-took-over-the-police/00000190-1245-db28-a995-57ddcf390000) (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-06-13/ty-article-magazine/.premium/how-national-security-minister-ben-gvir-took-over-the-police/00000190-1245-db28-a995-57ddcf390000>) and [Bezalel Smotrich](https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/editorial/2024-06-24/ty-article-opinion/.premium/smotrich-has-a-plan-to-annex-the-west-bank-and-netanyahu-supports-it/00000190-46a8-d91c-abba-efb8e7f90000) (<https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/editorial/2024-06-24/ty-article-opinion/.premium/smotrich-has-a-plan-to-annex-the-west-bank-and-netanyahu-supports-it/00000190-46a8-d91c-abba-efb8e7f90000>) to make that outcome impossible.

Martin knew he would not live to see this outcome and in April spoke of what he believed would eventually happen. Like Moses, he said, “I’ve seen the Promised Land, I’ve seen what it looks like. I’ve negotiated the details. I know where they end up...And so even though I won’t cross over, I’m still confident that in the end, as all conflicts come to an end, this one will too, and its result will be a two-state solution.”

I saw Martin six days before his death. We both knew this was good-bye and yet he still wanted to have a substantive conversation about the hostages, about what could come next, and about how to change the trajectory again toward peacemaking. At one point he said, “You will never give up, you will keep trying,” and I nodded and said, “Just as you would if you had your health.”

Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on the Haaretz website (<https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2024-07-28/ty-article-opinion/.premium/martin-indyk-u-s-envoy-who-saw-the-promised-land-ending-the-israel-palestinian-conflict/00000190-f868-d298-a592-f87ba7740000>). ❖

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