

Where You Sit is Where You Stand: Table Arrangement Battles in Middle East Peace Conferences

*Joel Singer*¹
Independent scholar
Joelsinger3@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article analyzes one procedural prenegotiation issue that may seem minor in comparison to the substantive questions at hand, but can become consequential regarding its impact on the negotiation and its outcome. How the negotiating table is configured and where the parties will sit is the focus of our analysis. We examine how these questions were addressed in advance of key Vietnam and Middle East peace talks. The study assesses various strategies that were employed effectively to blur potential visual manifestations of symbolic and precedential advantage by one side.

Keywords

prenegotiation – Middle East – Vietnam – negotiating table – negotiation strategies

In almost every peace conference, well before the parties enter the conference room and begin to negotiate the issues at hand, there is a preliminary phase in which the parties attempt to establish the rules of the game for the talks.

¹ Joel Singer served as Legal Adviser of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs and, previously, as Director of the International Law Department of the Israel Defense Forces. Singer was a member of Israeli delegations negotiating peace treaties and other agreements with all of Israel's Arab neighbors, including Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and the Palestinians. Singer blogs on Israeli–Arab negotiations issues on his website: <https://www.joelsinger.org>.

In this initial phase, the parties address seemingly procedural questions, such as what issues must or must not be discussed; which parties will be included or excluded from the conference; what role any third party will have in the negotiations; whether or not there will be any preconditions for the discussions; and the place and schedule for the conference.

To some, this stage may seem relatively trivial – posturing and quibbling over procedural and contextual details before the substantive negotiations begin. In fact, however, how such issues are decided can significantly impact the outcome of the negotiations. As a result, the negotiating parties tend to invest significant efforts in these preliminary discussions in an attempt to shape the framework for negotiations in a manner that would best advance their own objectives or, at least, prevent their adversaries from preempting the outcome of the discussions.

The 1991 Middle East Peace Conference in Madrid provides a prime example. In the run-up to the conference, Israelis and Palestinians argued incessantly over whether or not some of the Palestinian delegates could be residents of East Jerusalem. While technically only a procedural question, that fight in fact represented an attempt by both sides to preempt the outcome of the substantive negotiations to follow – setting precedent during this early stage that would influence the ultimate future of East Jerusalem or, further, whether or not East Jerusalem would even be an issue for negotiation (Baker 1995: 492).

Normally, questions such as these are addressed in letters of invitation or similar documents that must be carefully negotiated and agreed in advance of the conference. Sometimes, however, the parties' preliminary attempts to influence the conference's outcome have also spilled into other areas, such as how to arrange the tables in the conference room. Because it is quite common in international conferences to allow the media access to the conference room for a photo opportunity, the manner in which the tables are arranged could be read by the world as an indication of each party's positions or concessions. As they say, a picture is worth a thousand words. No wonder, therefore, that skirmishes over conference room table arrangements are quite frequent. Paraphrasing von Clausewitz's observation that "war is the continuation of policy using other means," one can say that peace conference table battles are the prelude to policy using other means.

While table battles often occur in peace conferences addressing disputes originating in the various parts of the world, this article focuses on such battles that have occurred in Middle East Peace conferences. But let's start with the Vietnam peace conference.

The Vietnam Paris Peace Conference Table Battle

The table battle phenomenon first captured the world's attention in 1968, in the run-up to negotiations to end the war in Vietnam. When the negotiations were about to start, everyone agreed that representatives of the United States, the Government of South Vietnam (formally, the Republic of South Vietnam) and the Government of North Vietnam (formally, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam) should participate, despite North Vietnam's lack of recognition of the South Vietnamese government. As the three primary actors in the conflict, all three had to be at the table for a peace agreement to be reached (which would not happen until the 1973 Paris Peace Accords).

An argument arose, however, regarding the participation in the conference of the Viet Cong (formally, the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam) – the guerilla movement fighting against South Vietnamese and American forces in the South. The US and South Vietnam argued that the Viet Cong was merely a pawn of North Vietnam and, therefore, at most, its representatives should participate in the conference as part of the North Vietnamese delegation. In other words, the US-South Vietnamese coalition argued that the conference should be a three-party meeting. Conversely, North Vietnam and the Viet Cong argued that the Viet Cong was an authentic South Vietnamese organization, assisted by – but not affiliated with – the North Vietnamese communists. Therefore, the Viet Cong should participate in the peace conference as an independent party. Stated otherwise, North Vietnam and the Viet Cong argued that the peace conference should be organized as a four-party meeting (Harriman 1979).

Due to the intransigence of all parties, this argument was left unresolved. Instead, the parties preferred to proceed to meet at the Paris Peace Conference having adopted only a vague formula by which they pretended that only two parties were participating in the conference. Rather than deciding on a three-party or a four-party meeting, and they simply referred to “our side” and “your side” without specifying the precise identity of each side. But that ambiguous formulation could only go so far (Harriman 1979). Once the time had arrived to set up the tables at the Hotel Majestic – the location of the Vietnam Peace Conference in Paris – the debate resumed with a vengeance. For ten weeks (November 1968 through January 1969), the parties debated the shape of the conference table, how many tables would be included and how they would be arranged – all seeking to manipulate the image the world would see toward their own interests. Hence, this diplomatic fight obtained the moniker “the Battle of the Tables.”

North Vietnam's opening proposal was that the conference table would be rectangular, so that the Viet Cong delegation could be visibly seen as a separate party (with the United States, North Vietnam and South Vietnam occupying the other three sides of the table). Alternatively, North Vietnam proposed four tables (one for each delegation) arranged in a circle or a diamond shape pattern. South Vietnam, however, rejected this proposal (Kissinger 2003: 54). The United States countered with a long, two-sided table, or alternatively, two rectangular tables, which North Vietnam rejected.

North Vietnam then proposed the idea of a round table, which the United States was inclined to accept, albeit for the opposite reason of North Vietnam. The Americans supported the round table idea because it blurred the sharp borders between the delegations that a rectangular table would present distinctively, whereas the North Vietnamese insisted that a round table would emphasize the equal footing of the four delegations seated around it. Given the North Vietnamese characterization of the round table solution, the Americans came with six alternative modifications to the round table concept, each intended to undermine North Vietnam's assertion that the Viet Cong's representation at the Paris Conference was equal to that of the South Vietnamese Government. Among these proposed variants, all of which were rejected by North Vietnam, were the following designs (Michaels 2017):

- a round table divided in the middle by a long strip of beige color (creating the impression that there are actually only two parties);
- one round table cut in half;
- two semi-circular tables; and
- a flattened ellipse

The "Battle of the Tables" was finally resolved through a proposal made by a Soviet diplomat, which all parties accepted: a round table with no flags, names of delegations or other markings. Done this way, the number and identity of the delegations participating in the Paris Peace Conference were deliberately papered over (Kissinger 2003: 54). Ultimately, when the Paris Peace Conference ended four years later with the text of the *Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam*, all four parties, including the Viet Cong, signed the agreement. Shortly thereafter, however, fighting resumed. Two years later, Saigon fell to North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces and the Government of South Vietnam disappeared.

Several years after the Vietnam "Battle of the Tables," when Israelis and Arabs began negotiating peace agreements following the October 1973 Yom Kippur War, they demonstrated to the world that, when it comes to table arrangement battles, everything the Far East can do, the Middle East can do better. The following three events – drawn from three distinct Middle East

peace conferences – illustrate this point. It should be understood, however, that these are only three examples of table battles – a field of diplomatic sparring quite prevalent in the history of Middle East peacemaking.

The 1973 Geneva Middle East Peace Conference: The Empty Syrian Table

On December 21, 1973, a Middle East Peace Conference convened at the Palais de Nations in Geneva pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 338 of October 22, 1973. That resolution called for an immediate ceasefire in the war (now known as the Yom Kippur War) which had started on October 5, when Egypt and Syria attacked Israel. The resolution also called for the immediate implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 242 (which was adopted in 1967 and established the principle of “land for peace”), as well as for the immediate and concurrent commencement of negotiations “between the parties concerned under appropriate auspices aimed at establishing a just and durable peace in the Middle East.”

In the intensive formal and informal consultations that occurred following the adoption of UN Resolution 338, it was agreed that the conference would be convened in Geneva under the auspices of UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim, and that the United States, represented by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and the Soviet Union, represented by Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, would participate in the conference as its two co-chairmen. It was further agreed that the two co-chairmen would send an invitation to the three parties that fought in the Yom Kippur War – Israel, Egypt and Syria – as well as to Jordan, which did not participate but was nonetheless one of the “parties concerned,” having lost the West Bank to Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War. Finally, it was agreed that the conference would begin with a ceremonial opening session attended by all participants, that would last only one day and that thereafter the conference would break into a series of working groups in which Israel would negotiate with each of its Arab neighbors on a bilateral basis (Quandt 1993: 194–97).

Israel, Egypt and Jordan accepted the invitation and sent delegations headed by their respective foreign ministers – Abba Eban, Ismail Fahmi, and Zaid Rifai. Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, who initially appeared to accept the invitation, surprised everyone by informing Kissinger just three days before the conference that Syria would not attend (Quandt 1993: 197). Among the reasons for Assad’s decision not to attend was his refusal to provide to Israel a list of all Israeli prisoners of war (POW) in Syrian captivity (after Israel and Egypt

had exchanged all POWs prior to the convening of the conference) and Israel's refusal to accept his condition that Israel must agree to withdraw entirely from the Golan Heights prior to the opening meeting of the Geneva Convention.

Notwithstanding Syria's absence, it was decided to proceed with opening the peace conference with the other participants, while keeping an empty Syrian table at the Geneva conference room as a visible signal that Syria could still join the peace discussions at a later time if it changed its mind. Among many other issues that were discussed in the days leading to the ceremonial opening session, but which were not resolved until the morning of the meeting, was how to arrange the conference tables.

As Kissinger subsequently recounted it, Gromyko proposed to Waldheim a seating arrangement that placed the UN Secretary-General in the middle, with the Soviet Union, Egypt and the empty Syrian table on Waldheim's right, and with the United States, Israel and Jordan on his left (Kissinger 2011:795–96). Gromyko's plan presumably reflected his vision that each of the two superpowers should be seated together with its two regional client states (Figure 1).

Kissinger, however, rejected this plan outright. First, the arrangement could be read as an insult to Jordan. Not only did Jordan fail to join Egypt and Syria in their attack against Israel a couple of months earlier, thus missing an opportunity to credibly demand a separation of forces in the West Bank equal to what Egypt and Syria obtained in the Sinai and the Golan Heights, but locating its table away from those of Egypt and Syria would present it as an outsider to the Arab world. Second, Kissinger resented Gromyko's attempt to present Egypt as a Soviet client, just as Egypt was making its first steps – with Kissinger's active encouragement and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's keen interest – to detach itself from the Soviet camp and join forces with the United States (Kissinger 2011:795).

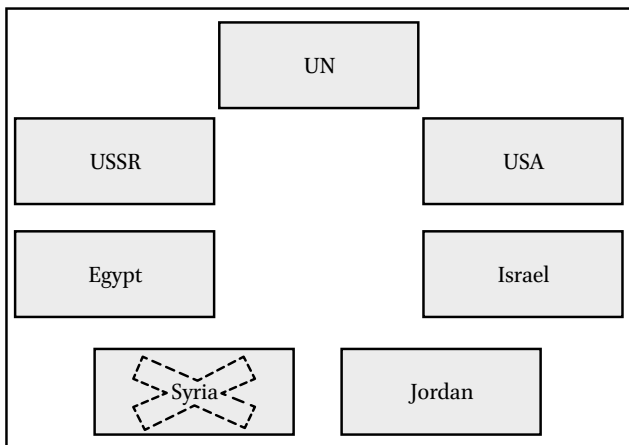


FIGURE 1 Gromyko's Opening Proposal

Waldheim then proposed instead to arrange the tables in alphabetic order, consistent with protocol for United Nations meetings (Figure 2). While this suggestion fixed the issues posed by Gromyko's proposal, it created a new problem, placing the Egyptian table next to the Israeli table. When Egyptian Foreign Minister Fahmi heard that his table would be adjacent to Eban's, he demanded that the empty Syrian table be placed between Egypt's table and Israel's (Figure 3). Fahmi clearly did not want the image of his delegation seated next to the Israelis to be seen, going so far as to also tell the UN Secretary-General that, at the post-conference cocktail party, he hoped that the Israelis and Egyptians would be on two opposite sides of the room (Stein 1999: 139).

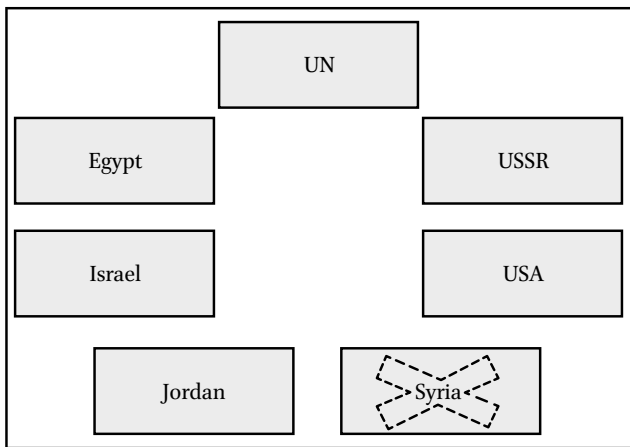


FIGURE 2 Waldheim's Alphabetical Proposal

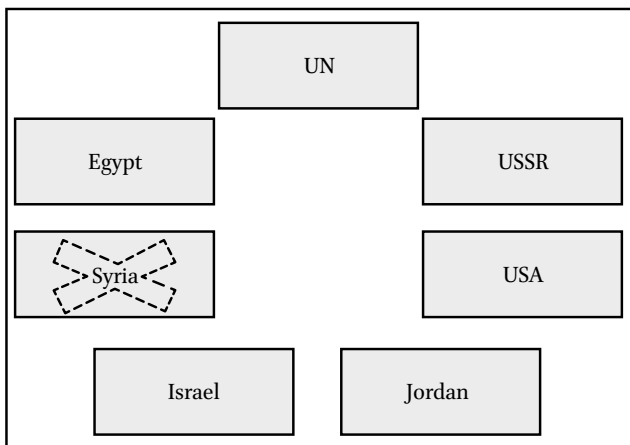


FIGURE 3 Fahmi's Proposal (Amending Waldheim's Proposal)

When Israeli Foreign Minister Eban arrived at the Palais de Nations the morning of the conference and heard about the Egyptian demand, he protested. As Eban subsequently described it, he told Waldheim that the media likely would focus on the empty table separating Egypt and Israel, adding that nothing is more ridiculous than opening a “Peace Conference” with the image of the two countries seeking to reconcile unable to even sit next to each other (Eban 1978: 537). Jordan too did not like this idea because Fahmi’s modification to Waldheim’s proposal would have placed Jordan’s table next to the Israeli table, again projecting that Jordan was not as anti-Israel as Egypt (Kissinger 2011:795).

The table battle was finally resolved, well after the intended time for the peace conference to open, in a discussion held between Kissinger and Gromyko based on a proposal brought up by a member of the Israeli delegation (Figure 4). Thus, on the morning of December 21, the American delegation headed by Kissinger and the Israeli delegation headed by Eban met to discuss all pending issues.² When the discussion turned to the still unresolved seating arrangement, Kissinger noted jokingly: “I made a proposal yesterday that they should leave three seats open and let the Arabs and Israelis make a race for them.”

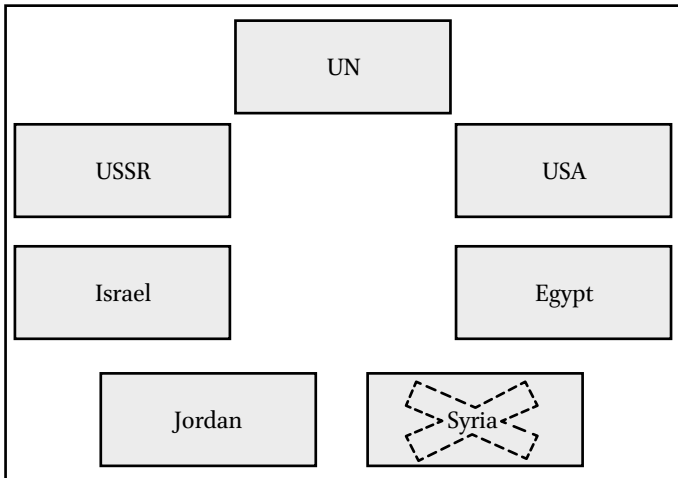


FIGURE 4 Kissinger’s Proposal – Agreed by All Participants

2 See Memorandum of Conversation, dated December 21, 1973, United States Department of State, Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Vol. xxv, Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973, document 414, At: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v25/d414>.

When the discussion got serious again, the Deputy Director General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry Ephraim (Eppie) Evron proposed to resolve the seating issue by placing Israel between the Soviet Union and Jordan and placing the empty Syrian table between Jordan and Egypt. Thus, the arrangement would be: the UN Secretary-General, the Soviet Union, Israel, Jordan, the empty Syrian table, Egypt and the United States.³ Even though under this proposal Egypt's table was not placed near the Israeli table, these two tables were not conspicuously separated by the empty Syrian table and all of the other concerns raised with regard to the previous proposals also were properly addressed. Kissinger liked the compromise idea and then convinced Gromyko, Waldheim, Fahmi and Rifai to accept it. The Peace Conference could finally begin (Kissinger 2011:796).

The Geneva Middle East Peace Conference never convened again after its ceremonial opening session on December 21, 1993. Yet, it was a first step toward an Israel-Egypt peace treaty six years later (1979) and an Israel-Jordan peace treaty 21 years later (1994). And even as Syria finally agreed to meet with Israel to begin discussions over a peace treaty in 1991, as of this writing – 47 years later – an Israel-Syria peace treaty is yet to be accomplished. So, in a way, the Syrian table is still empty.

The 1983 Israel-Lebanon Peace Talks: The U-Shaped vs. Triangular Table Battle⁴

In 1982, Israel invaded southern Lebanon with the objective of driving out Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) forces which had been regularly terrorizing northern Israeli towns and villages. The stated objective was to force the PLO militia north and create a 40 kilometer-wide security strip along the Israeli-Lebanese border.

Unbeknownst to the rest of the Israeli Government, however, Israeli Minister of Defense Ariel Sharon had grander plans, which he had secretly coordinated with the leader of the Lebanese Christian Phalanges Party and commander of the Lebanese Army, Bashir Gemayel. According to the plan, Sharon ordered the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to continue to advance north – well beyond the 40 kilometer line – all the way to Beirut, where they met with Gemayel's

3 Ibid.

4 This part of the article is based primarily on my own experience. As the IDF's Director of the International Law Department, I was a member of the Israeli delegation to the 1983 Israeli-Lebanese talks, responsible for drafting all the military parts of the agreement.

Lebanese Army forces. Gemayel, like Sharon, wanted the Syrian forces occupying parts of Lebanon to withdraw. Those forces entered Lebanon years earlier at the invitation of the country's Muslim parties in response to the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990) in which Christian and Muslim militias battled with devastating results.

In Lebanon's 1982 general elections, Gemayel was elected President of Lebanon. According to secret arrangements, Gemayel's new government would quickly negotiate a peace treaty with Israel establishing friendly relations with Israel and would call on all foreign forces (that is, both Syrian and Israeli) to withdraw from Lebanon. That plan, however, unraveled very quickly. Two weeks after Bashir Gemayel was elected president, he was assassinated by suspected Syrian agents. In response, Christian militias took revenge by massacring thousands of Palestinians at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps near Beirut, while Israeli forces failed to stop the massacre. Shocked by the event, the Israeli Government appointed a commission of inquiry which found Sharon indirectly responsible, which resulted in Sharon's dismissal as Minister of Defense in February 1983. Meanwhile, the Lebanese Parliament appointed Amine Gemayel as president in lieu of his assassinated brother Bashir.

Against this complex backdrop, Israeli-Lebanese peace negotiations commenced in December 1982. President Amine Gemayel proved far less charismatic than his late brother and carried a much weaker public mandate. He also attempted to distance himself from Israel, in large part to placate the Christian and Muslim factions in his new government, many of which detested the close relations that Bashir maintained with Israel. The Lebanese delegation to the peace talks, which was comprised of all Lebanese identity groups, included Sunni and Shiite Muslims, as well as Maronite, Catholic and Greek Orthodox Christians. It sometimes appeared that the internal discussions of the Lebanese delegation took longer and were apparently more heated than the discussions with the Israeli delegation, as the Lebanese delegates attempted to seek an intra-delegation consensus on various issues (Kimche 1991: 144–45).

This environment, and especially the need to distance Lebanon from Israel, resulted in several Lebanese demands. On the substance, Lebanon did not want to negotiate a new agreement with Israel, instead suggesting that the 1949 Israel-Lebanon Armistice Agreement – a purely military agreement that was implemented by military officers of both sides – be revived and amended where necessary. Even after Lebanon gave up on this demand and agreed to negotiate a new agreement, the Lebanese delegation still insisted that the agreement not be called a “peace treaty,” but rather simply an “agreement.” Lebanon also refused to allow the opening of embassies in both countries, but

instead insisted that each of the parties could establish “Liaison Offices” in the territory of the other party, a demand that Israel accepted. Finally, to distance itself further from Israel, Lebanon demanded that a United States delegation also be present at the negotiations, which both Israel and the US willingly accepted. It was also agreed that the three delegations would meet alternately in Lebanon and in Israel. The meetings in Lebanon took place in a small town near Beirut called Khalde, close to the Beirut International Airport.

When the Israeli and American delegations first arrived at the venue in Khalde where the negotiations were to take place, they were surprised to see that the conference room tables, complete with the flags and nameplates of the three delegations, were set up in a U-shaped pattern with the American table located in the center (Figure 5). The two delegations were even more surprised when the head of the Lebanese delegation, Ambassador Antoine Fatal, explained that Lebanon expected the United States to lead the discussions with the head of the American delegation, Ambassador Morris Draper, serving as the chairman of the talks.

The Israelis protested this proposed table arrangement and the political idea behind it, with its head, Ambassador Dave Kimche, arguing that the accepted practice in such diplomatic situations is that the head of the delegation belonging to the meeting’s host country serves as the chairman of the talks. In other words, Fatal would chair all the talks in Lebanon and Kimche would chair all the talks in Israel. Draper supported the Israeli position, explaining that he and his American colleagues were prepared to take an active role in the discussions by proposing compromises where necessary, but they would not lead the negotiations, which were ultimately meant to be bilateral (Israeli-Lebanese).

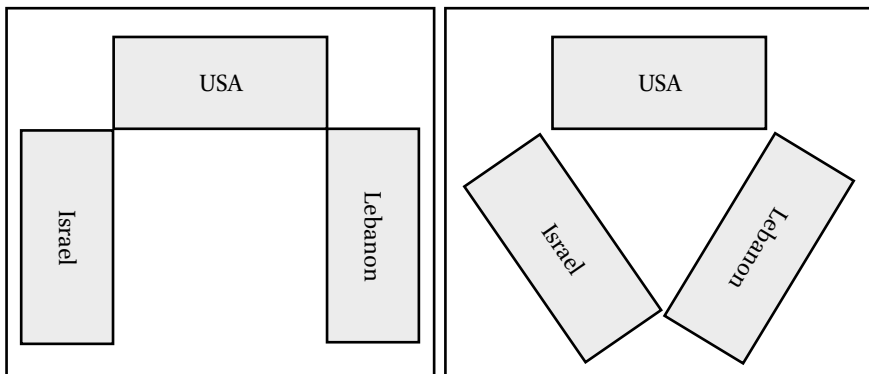


FIGURE 5 The Lebanon-Proposed U-Shape Table Arrangement and the Agreed Table Arrangement

As time for the expected commencement of the talks came and went, representatives of the press, which had been invited to cover the first meeting of the Israel-Lebanon discussions, were impatiently waiting outside the conference room while the “table arrangement battle” carried on inside. Ultimately, the three delegations agreed that, in order to resolve the debate (substantive and optical) over the American role in the negotiations, the conference room tables would simply be dragged to form a triangular formation. This table arrangement blurred the strong image that Lebanon wanted to project to the media, of the United States sitting in the middle of the room, separating the Lebanese and Israeli delegations and brokering negotiations, but it also avoided showing the Lebanese delegation occupying the central table and chairing the talks, as Israel wanted.

Ultimately, Israel and Lebanon completed and signed the agreement on May 17, 1983. However, due to Syrian pressures, Lebanon never ratified the agreement and, as a result, it never entered into force. Israel then began a process of unilateral, phased withdrawal of its forces from Lebanon, which ended in June 2000, while Syria’s forces remained deployed in Lebanon. Notwithstanding the fact that in 1991, Israel and Lebanon resumed peace discussions as part of the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference, Israeli-Lebanese peace has remained evasive.

The 1991 Israeli-Jordanian-Palestinian Sofa Discussions

In 1991, at the conclusion of the first Gulf War, US Secretary of State James A. Baker, III orchestrated the convening of a Middle East Peace Conference in Madrid. This time, unlike the 1973 Middle East Peace Conference, Syria agreed to participate, joining Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel. The other important difference between the Madrid and Geneva conferences was that, while representatives of the Palestinians were not invited to the Geneva Peace Conference in 1973, the United States was determined to allow the Palestinians to participate in Madrid. This change resulted primarily from the fact that in 1973 Jordan claimed that it represented the interests of the Palestinians. That assertion changed in July 1988, when Jordanian King Hussein declared that the Hashemite Kingdom was cutting all legal and administrative ties to the West Bank, as a partial response to the First Intifada. This was followed by an August 7 press conference in which Jordan announced it would never again assume the role of speaking on behalf of the Palestinians. This decision raised the question of who could credibly represent the Palestinians at the Madrid Peace Conference.

Israel's position had long been that it would not talk with the PLO, which it considered a terrorist organization whose goal was to destroy the State of Israel. While prior attempts to identify and negotiate with local Palestinian leadership not affiliated with the PLO had failed, some in Israel held out hope that a local, non-PLO delegation could be formed to serve as a Palestinian delegation to the negotiations. Secretary Baker, however, advanced the concept of a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation that would represent both Jordanian and Palestinian interests. The idea of a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation actually came from Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, the hardline leader of the right-wing Likud Party, who objected to the participation in the conference of an independent Palestinian delegation (Ross 2004: 71). Underlying Shamir's demand that the Palestinians could participate in the Madrid Peace conference only as part of a Jordanian delegation was his objection to the notion that there is a Palestinian national identity that is separate from that of Jordan, from whom Israel had captured the West Bank in 1967 and who had for decades asserted to represent the Palestinians.

The Palestinians themselves strongly objected to being relegated to only part of a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation (Kurtzer *et al.* 2013: 30). Yet, Baker understood that Shamir would not budge on this point and, therefore, worked to convince the Palestinians to accept this idea by working out, through extensive preliminary discussions with Israel, Jordan and the Palestinians, a formula for the work of the joint delegation that maintained a delicate balance between the positions of all parties (Baker 1995: 445). That formula was contained in the letter of invitation sent by the two co-sponsors of the conference – the United States and the Soviet Union – to all participants, as well as in a separate letter of assurances that the United States sent to the Palestinians.

The letter of invitation to the conference was very clear that the Palestinians would form part of a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. For instance, the letter stated that “[g]overnments to be invited include Israel, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. Palestinians will be invited and attend as part of a joint Jordanian Palestinian delegation.”⁵ The letter of invitation added: “With respect to negotiations between Israel and Palestinians who are part of the joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation, negotiations will be conducted in phases, beginning with talks on interim self-government arrangements.” The letter then went on to specify the next phases.

5 For the text of the US-Soviet Invitation to the Mideast Peace Conference in Madrid, October 18, 1991, see Quandt (1993) at Appendix N.

The letter of assurances sent to the Palestinians attempted to partially sweeten the bitter “joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation” pill that they had to swallow (Ross 2004: 78) by stating, among other assurances:

- The US doesn’t seek to determine who speaks for Palestinians in this process. We are seeking to launch a political negotiating process that directly involves Palestinians and offers a pathway for achieving the legitimate political rights of the Palestinian people and for participation in the determination of their future. We believe that a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation offers the most promising pathway toward this end.
- Palestinians will be free to announce the component of the joint delegation and to make a statement during the opening of the conference. They may also raise any issue pertaining to the substance of the negotiations during the negotiation.⁶

According to the letter of invitation, the Madrid Peace Conference was to be convened at a ministerial level beginning on October 30, 1991 and last for only a couple of days; thereafter, the conference was to be broken into a series of bilateral negotiations to be conducted at a negotiator level between Israel and each of the other Arab delegations. It was also agreed that the bilateral discussions would resume shortly thereafter at the State Department in Washington.

When the Middle East Peace Conference opened on October 30 in the Salon de las Columas of the Royal Palace in Madrid, the delegates were seated at a ‘T’ shaped table. This long table arrangement – instead of a circle of individual country tables – was carefully selected by Baker and his assistants, after careful study of the 1973 Geneva Middle East Peace Conference. It sought to avoid any arguments that would have undoubtedly otherwise ensued over whether the Jordanians and Palestinians would be seated at two separate tables or at one table. In a further attempt to avoid any such arguments, the conference organizers only allowed the display of national flags for the two conference co-sponsors, the United States and Soviet Union. No other flags of the participating parties were allowed – an effort to avoid any quibbling about whether a Palestinian flag could be displayed. Clearly, the organizers thought through every small detail to ensure that no disruption would occur. Or so they thought.

Following the Madrid Conference’s ceremonial opening session, a number of bilateral meetings were held, including a meeting between the Israeli and the Jordanian-Palestinian delegations. The teams then returned home and prepared for a trip to Washington for follow-on bilateral discussions in early December 1991.

⁶ *Ibid.*, at Appendix M.

In Washington, the State Department organizers arranged for conference rooms in the Truman Building for each of the bilateral negotiating groups, including one conference room for discussions between the Israeli delegation and the joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation (Kurtzer 2020) (Figure 6). To everyone's surprise, however, when the delegations arrived at the State Department on the first day of these meetings, the Palestinian team refused to enter the conference room and demanded that the State Department allocate two conference rooms – one for the Israeli-Jordanian discussions and one for the Israeli-Palestinian discussions – alongside the other conference rooms arranged for the bilateral discussions between Israel and the other Arab countries (Ashrawi 2015:161–62, 171).

Spokespersons for the Palestinians also began referring to the Palestinian delegates in the joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation as a “Palestinian delegation” in their daily press conferences. In other words, the argument that arose was not limited to whether there would be one or two tables, but it expanded to whether there would be one table in one conference room, as Israel wanted, or two tables in two conference rooms, as the Palestinians wanted (Figure 7).

The Israelis argued that the Palestinian demand violated the agreed principle incorporated in the letter of invitation to the Madrid Peace Conference – that there would be only a single, joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. Yet, the Palestinians insisted that they wanted to discuss Palestinian-related issues directly with the Israelis without the Jordanians present. Clearly, this argument was not only about a procedural issue; rather, the Palestinians were seeking to advance their claim for a Palestinian State that would be independent of both Israel and Jordan, through the one room/two rooms squabble.

Because the Palestinians refused to enter the conference room, the discussions between the Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians occurred – by default – while the three delegations were standing in the corridor outside the conference room. As these discussions proceeded, someone brought a sofa out into the corridor, so that the head of the Israeli delegation and the two heads of the Jordanian team and the Palestinian team in the joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation could continue the discussions while sitting (Kurtzer 2020). Accordingly, those discussions, which took a couple of weeks, became known



FIGURE 6 The Madrid Formula (One Conference Room with Two Delegations)

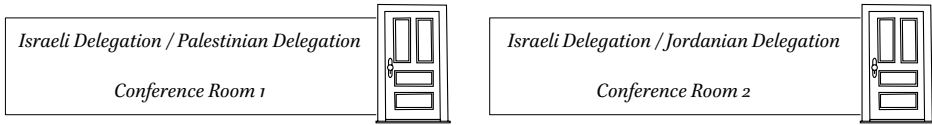


FIGURE 7 The Palestinian Demand (Two Conference Rooms with three Delegations)

variably as the “corridor discussions,” the “hallway talks,” the “sofa talks,” or “couch diplomacy” (Kempster 1991; Crossette 1991).

Eventually, a compromise was reached. The Palestinians agreed to drop their demand for meeting with the Israelis as a separate delegation in a conference room separate from the Jordanians, and Israel agreed that, after an initial meeting of the Israeli delegation with the joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation, two working groups would be created that would meet separately: one group consisting primarily of Jordanian members with two Palestinian delegates to discuss unique Jordanian issues, and a second group consisting primarily of Palestinian members with two Jordanian delegates to discuss unique Palestinian issues (Figure 8).

The parties also agreed that the larger group of Israelis, Jordanians and Palestinians could meet in the future, as needed (Kurtzer 2020). In fact, however, the two Jordanian delegates in the predominantly Palestinian group were completely passive during the substantive discussions (as was the case for the two Palestinian delegates in the predominately Jordanian group), and the larger Israeli-Jordanian-Palestinian group never met after its initial meeting. At the same time, to make a political point, the Israeli delegation did not split into two groups to meet in parallel with the Jordanian group and the Palestinian group. Instead, the entire Israeli delegation met with either the Jordanian group or the Palestinian group, alternately.

While Madrid did not directly lead to a resolution of the Palestinian problem, the precedents set in the Madrid process did spur important progress. Ultimately – without the knowledge of the members of the Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian negotiators in Washington – a small Israeli team (in which I participated) met with a small team of PLO representatives in Oslo. The ultimate result of these meetings was the Israel-PLO Mutual Recognition Agreement and the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements (known as the Oslo Agreement), which was signed in Washington on September 13, 1993. As originally drafted, the Oslo Agreement was to be made between the Israeli Delegation and the Palestinian Team of the Joint Jordanian-Palestinian Delegation to the Madrid talks. However, due to last-minute demands by the PLO, on the morning of the signing ceremony, this format was changed so that the agreement was ultimately designated as one between the Government of Israel and the PLO (Singer 2018).

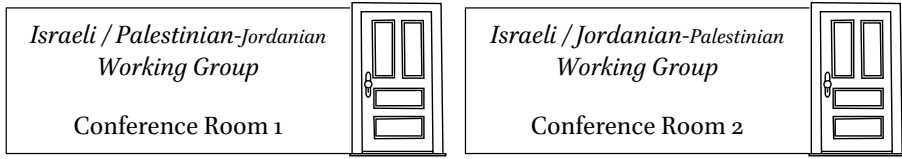


FIGURE 8 The Agreed Compromise (Two Delegations with Two Working Groups)

Conclusion

While not unique to Middle East peacemaking, table battles can be grouped into two main categories when occurring in the context of Middle East peace conferences. When a table battle was initiated by an Arab country, it normally reflected the traditional position once held by most Arab countries who refused to accept the legitimacy (and even existence) of the State of Israel, which historically was referred to pejoratively by Arab states as the “Zionist entity,” rather than by its name. Consistent with this approach, in 1949 when Israel commenced negotiating separately a series of General Armistice Agreements with its Arab neighbors to end the war – beginning with Egypt and then Jordan – the Arab delegations to these discussions refused to sit with the Israeli delegation around the same table, in fact not even in the same room. Instead, the United Nations mediator, Dr. Ralph Bunche, was forced to go back and forth between separate rooms in which the Israeli and Arab delegations were seated, in what was described as “Proximity Talks.”

Immediately after the 1967 Six-Day War, the Arab League formalized this position in its “Three No’s” resolutions of September 1967 adopted in its meeting in Sudan’s capital Khartoum: no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with Israel.⁷ As the Yom Kippur War ended in October 1973, the United Nations, United States and the Soviet Union urged Israel and its Arab neighbors to commence discussions regarding Israeli withdrawal and peace treaties. While Israel wanted to hold direct discussions with each of its Arab neighbors separately, the Arab countries insisted on holding an international conference with the participation of all Arab countries and with the United Nations and the two superpowers hosting the discussions, so as to emphasize that these discussions were not held directly with Israel.

Some Arab countries, particularly Syria, also argued that sitting together with Israel around the same table may be considered a recognition of Israel’s

7 For the text of the Khartoum resolutions, dated September 1, 1967, see the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, at: <https://mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/the%20khartoum%20resolutions.aspx>.

existence. To Syrian officialdom, such a step would only be acceptable *after* the conclusion of a peace treaty, which, in turn, could occur only after Israel had agreed to fully withdraw from the entire territory it occupied in the June 1967 War (Ross 2004: 79). This fundamental Arab position underlay the Syrian empty table and the refusal of Egyptian Foreign Minister Fahmy to have his table placed next to the table of Israeli Foreign Minister Eban in the 1973 Geneva Peace Conference. This position was also the reason for the Lebanese demand to arrange the tables in a U-shaped format and place the United States' table between the Israeli and Lebanese tables in the 1982 Israeli-Lebanese peace negotiations.

When a table battle was initiated by Israel, it often reflected Israel's opposition to PLO participation in a peace conference or the participation in the conference of a separate Palestinian delegation, even if not formally representing the PLO. This Israeli position stemmed from the existential nature of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, in which two peoples have competing claims to the same territory of the former Mandatory Palestine, consisting of Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. Israel's claim to the West Bank goes back some 3000 years, when that territory was referred to by its biblical name, Judea and Samaria, where the ancient Kingdoms of Israel and Judah reined, the origin of the Jews. The Palestinian position, conversely, considered all of former Mandatory Palestine – including what became Israel in 1948, territory in which Palestinians have lived for hundreds of years – to belong to them. As enshrined in the Palestinian Charter, the PLO called for the destruction of Israel and its replacement with a Palestinian state.

These underlying conflicting positions, therefore, resulted in a situation resembling the one that existed in 1968 when North Vietnam and the Viet Cong did not recognize the legitimacy of the Government of South Vietnam, while the United States and South Vietnamese did not recognize the Viet Cong as an independent entity separate from North Vietnam. As Kissinger (2003: 52) observed with regard to the Paris Peace Conference, "In every revolutionary conflict, the acceptance of the guerrillas as a negotiating partner has proved to be the single most important obstacle to negotiations, for it obliges the government to recognize the legal status of the enemy determined to overthrow it." Those words are equally applicable to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and for this reason the table battle that occurred in the 1991 Madrid Middle East Peace Conference mirrored that of the 1968 Paris Peace Conference.

Over the years, as more and more Arab countries have entered into peace treaties and normalization of relations agreements with Israel, including Egypt (1979), Jordan (1994), the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and

Morocco (all in 2020), and after Israel and the PLO entered into the 1993 Mutual Recognition Agreement, the impetus of both Arabs and Israelis to instigate table battles in peace conferences has waned. But old convictions and habits die hard. It is, therefore, quite possible that the world will witness more such battles in future Middle East peacemaking events.

Lessons Learned

Two typical features of peace conferences, most always occurring at the preliminary phase of the conference, appear to drive the table battle phenomenon in Middle East diplomacy: the common tendency to invite the media to cover the opening meeting of the conference, and the irresistible urge of some participants to establish a favorable precedent on key contested issues (or, at least, block the other side's anticipated attempt to do so) at a time when the terms of reference for discussions have not been solidified.

Even though the intended purpose of each peace conference is to seek compromises between the positions of the negotiating parties, the parties must logically commence the discussions by presenting their opening positions. The display of national flags and the presence of microphones in front of each delegation, unfortunately, normally leads the delegations to present positions often more exaggerated and extreme than is actually the case.

More important, the presence of the media that record, take photographs or videotape, and even broadcast the meeting provides a golden opportunity for each delegation to speak, not to their counterpart delegations, but to their home country audience – including their own leadership and opponents – to prove that they are entirely loyal to their (opening) national positions. The presence of the media thus has the magical effect of transforming even the most flexible diplomats into rigid, unyielding, blustering obstructionists.

And since no one at home really reads the long documents establishing the conference's rules of the game or listens to long speeches (which are normally written or spoken in English, rather than the native language of the home country), it is easier to quickly and plainly demonstrate the delegation's adherence to its national positions (or, at least, avoid being caught betraying these positions) by displaying power and positioning through the furniture arrangement in the conference room. For instance, the media cameras – and, therefore, the entire world – can capture in one blink the presence or absence of a flag or a nameplate of a party that one of the delegations has vowed will, or will not, participate in the conference.

If the media were not allowed in, the preliminary procedures at peace conferences would develop much differently. In fact, if the media were kept out, there would be no real need for displaying flags and nameplates, and perhaps no particular need for opening speeches. The shape and number of tables then would lose their importance and the table battle phenomenon could be avoided altogether. For instance, the refusal of Egyptian Foreign Minister Fahmy to have his table placed near the table of Israeli Foreign Minister Eban in 1973 would not have arisen, but for the media's presence in the Geneva Middle East conference room. This is perhaps the reason that the 1978 Camp David conference – which resulted in the conclusion of a historic agreement between Egypt and Israel – was successful: the media were not allowed at Camp David. In the same vein, Israel and the PLO concluded the historic Oslo Agreement in 1993 when the media not only was not present, but remained entirely oblivious to these contacts and negotiations.

Of course, the exclusion of the media from the conference room will not always resolve all underlying substantive arguments. For instance, the Palestinian demand in 1991 to have a conference room for the negotiations with Israel separate from the Israeli-Jordanian conference room occurred inside the State Department building, where no access was provided to the media. Yet, each party freely briefed the media each day about this argument. Still, the fact that the media were not able to videotape inside the State Department conference rooms allowed the parties to address and resolve the issue more effectively.

But the media cannot always be kept out of sight in high-profile international conferences. This requires that conference organizers consider carefully the possibility that table arrangement battles can erupt and attempt to neutralize as many potential areas of friction as possible, as the United States did in the 1991 Madrid Conference, where it crafted a long T-shaped table without flags and country nameplates.

As the four examples of table battles reviewed herein demonstrate, all such battles were ultimately resolved through compromises that rearranged the conference room furniture in a manner that prevented any side from declaring victory. It is, therefore, advisable that in future peace conferences the organizers consider in advance any potential table battles that might develop and preempt such battles by adopting solutions that would avoid, as much as possible, such battles by blurring any potential visual manifestation of symbolic and precedential advantage, which could potentially relate to the key issues in dispute.

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