Why Mediations Fail:

A Case Study Analysis of Mediation Attempts in Northern Ireland and Israel-Palestine During the Clinton Administration

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 The United States (US) is often either blamed for getting too involved or not being involved enough in international conflicts. In this paper, two such conflicts, Northern Ireland and Israel-Palestine, and their American-run mediations under the Clinton administration, which was in power from 1993 to 2001, will be examined. In both cases, the US was involved as a mediator, attempting to help the involved parties establish ceasefires and governance agreements. However, these cases experienced different results, with Northern Ireland’s negotiations resulting in the Good Friday Agreement which was passed and remains in place at the time of writing, and Israel-Palestine not successfully negotiating any deals. This paper will examine how America gets involved in these cases, what their motivations for involvement are, and what indicators influence the effectiveness of any mediation attempts. This essay will argue that as demonstrated by these two cases, American mediation involvement is only valuable in specific domestic circumstances, when policy objectives are clear, and at the correct time in a conflict’s life span.

**Northern Ireland**

 In Northern Ireland, the Clinton administration intervened to mediate The Troubles, a period from 1960s to the 1990s where two groups, Unionists and Republicans, fought over what country Northern Ireland should be a part of.[[1]](#footnote-1) Unionists, who identify as British, believed the country should remain part of the United Kingdom (UK), while Nationalists wanted to join the Republic of Ireland.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, by the 1990s, when Clinton started to be involved, conflict was cooling and negotiations and ceasefires had begun to be negotiated.[[3]](#footnote-3)

 Part of Clinton’s electoral platform was to become a mediator in Northern Ireland.[[4]](#footnote-4) This is thought to have been primarily motivated by the Irish Lobby, a group of American voters who were in support of the Irish Republican cause and wished to see the conflict ended.[[5]](#footnote-5) Through pledging to get involved in this mediation, Clinton secured their votes and the US election of 1992. At the time, the Cold War was also ending, meaning the US could redirect their foreign policy objectives to being the world’s peacemaker, as they had more time, resources, and motivation to do so.[[6]](#footnote-6) It also meant the risk to their security declined, allowing them to risk a more tenuous relationship with their allies, including the British.[[7]](#footnote-7)

 Clinton’s involvement in this mediation process culminated in the Good Friday Agreement (GFA). This was an agreement signed between the British government, Irish government, and political parties in Northern Ireland, and subsequently passed in a referendum that took place in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.[[8]](#footnote-8) Clinton’s personality and the resources of his administration played a major role in creating this deal. He was seen as a trustworthy person within this process and was accessible and available to all parties involved, meaning they would have frequent conversations and calls with him and members of the administration, to soothe their fears, and to have concerns acknowledged.[[9]](#footnote-9) Additionally, his administration was seen as relatively unbiased, adding to a perception of trustworthiness.[[10]](#footnote-10) He was elected based on Irish-Republican supporting constituents, but there was a history of a ‘special relationship’ with the British government, so there was a perception that both sides were supported.[[11]](#footnote-11)

 The Good Friday Agreement was implemented in 1998 after a successful referendum.[[12]](#footnote-12) It outlines a governance structure for Northern Ireland and puts in place plans for reconciliation.[[13]](#footnote-13) With the negotiations and ratification of this agreement the conflict in Northern Ireland ended, and has remained so since, although occasional outbreaks of violence do sometimes occur.[[14]](#footnote-14) Overall, this mediated agreement was relatively successful in what it aimed to achieve, as it allowed for peace in Northern Ireland and the establishment of a fairer governance system. However, criticisms have emerged regarding how difficult to govern it is under this agreement, and post-Brexit the future of the agreement is more questionable.[[15]](#footnote-15) Despite this, the successful negotiation of this agreement can be viewed as one of the most important foreign policy successes of Clinton and his administration.

**Israel-Palestine**

 Conflict in the territory where Israel-Palestine is located is not a new concept. This strip of land is of incredible importance to three religious groups, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and this has resulted in it having a tumultuous history. The current iteration of this conflict is between two major groups, the Israelis who are Jewish Zionists, and the Palestinians who are primarily Muslim Arabs. Post-World-War-Two, there was an increased interest in Zionism.[[16]](#footnote-16) Zionism is a political-religious ideology that believes that there should be a Jewish nation with an associated physical territory as their homeland.[[17]](#footnote-17) The Zionist movement decided to settle in Palestine and began immigrating there in large numbers, setting up communities and political structures as they went.[[18]](#footnote-18) This was originally supported internationally, and agreements were created to provide the Zionists with land on which to live.[[19]](#footnote-19) However, there were also settlements placed in pre-existing Palestinian areas, which then experienced loss of land and significant discrimination.[[20]](#footnote-20) This resulted in several Intifadas, or resistance movements, led by Palestinian groups against the Israeli state.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Americans had been involved, to varying degrees, in this conflict since World War Two, and took over from the British as the primary imperial state in the region.[[22]](#footnote-22) During the beginning of Clinton’s presidency, he tended towards lower levels of US involvement, but by September 1993, his level of involvement started to increase.[[23]](#footnote-23) This involvement is thought to have been motivated by both a sense of responsibility for the conflict, as well as a belief that this could be his legacy.[[24]](#footnote-24) His involvement culminated in two major events, the Camp David Negotiations, and the Clinton Parameters.

 The Camp David negotiations occurred in July 2000.[[25]](#footnote-25) They did not result in any deals or agreements being signed. The Israeli version says that Palestinian leaders rejected Ehud Barak’s offer and instead tried to send Palestinian refugees to Israel.[[26]](#footnote-26) According to Palestinian narratives the talks broke down because the offer did not remove the concept of occupation.[[27]](#footnote-27) The reality is that despite best efforts and progress in these talks, the parties were not ready for peace, or prepared to make firm commitments.[[28]](#footnote-28) Proposals created during these negotiations were vague and did not result in a signed agreement, and they did not achieve peace within the region.[[29]](#footnote-29)

One success that the Clinton administration did have in this series of negotiations and talks was the Clinton Parameters, which were established in December 2000.[[30]](#footnote-30) Their intention was to create a basis for future agreement and the essence of these parameters was that Palestinians and Israelis would govern their respective communities, with the region being divided amongst the two groups.[[31]](#footnote-31) This was never a proper agreement and instead formed the basis of further negotiations.[[32]](#footnote-32) Neither side fully accepted the arrangement, but the idea of each group governing itself, or a two-state solution, has formed the basis of many ongoing negotiations in the region.[[33]](#footnote-33) Despite never becoming a peace agreement or a governing structure for the region, these parameters were somewhat effective in getting the two parties on the same page regarding possible solutions.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Today, this conflict is ongoing, with periods of low and high conflict. Additionally, there is wide disenfranchisement of the Palestinian people, as they do not have an effective governance system, as a result of no binding, or followed, agreements being created.[[35]](#footnote-35) While Clinton did establish the Clinton Parameters, his mediation involvement did not result in an agreement or peace and thus was a failure.

**Examination of Case Studies**

 These two examples of negotiation under the Clinton administration can be used as case studies for examining why and when American negotiations work and fail. Mediation theory posits that democracies are the most likely to mediate conflicts and they typically get involved for issues of image, ideology, or for resource acquisition.[[36]](#footnote-36) The cases of Northern Ireland and Israel-Palestine attracted American involvement for issues of image and ideology. Clinton believed that mediating and solving these conflicts would benefit him domestically, through electoral gains and by building a legacy.[[37]](#footnote-37) Additionally, democracies spread their own systems and ideology when mediating conflicts.[[38]](#footnote-38) This often means attempting to expand the vote, create fair elections, and representation of all people. In the Good Friday Agreement and the Clinton Parameters, spreading the vote and good representation are clear objectives. Despite similarities in these cases, they have different results, with Northern Ireland achieving peace, representation and a successful mediation, and Israel-Palestine not achieving a peace agreement. There are three main factors that influence the effectiveness of American mediation and negotiations. These are; American domestic politics, policies available to resolve this conflict, and the time at which mediation is attempted.

 The first important factor is the state of American domestic politics. In the case of the Northern Irish mediation, it was a good time in the American electoral cycle, and public interest in this conflict was high.[[39]](#footnote-39) Clinton was able to harness public interest for his own electoral needs, which gave him a political mandate to be involved. As involvement began at the beginning of his first term, this allowed the time for parties to negotiate with the same president, ensuring consistency and continued trust in the mediation process. It also allowed him to commit US support in the mediation process, further increasing trust.

This is different from the domestic situation during the mediation process in Israel-Palestine. In this case, intensive mediation efforts began near the end of Clinton’s term when there was little domestic support for him or the mediation process.[[40]](#footnote-40) The majority of mediation attempts occurred after the Lewinski scandal and impeachment, so public support for Clinton was low.[[41]](#footnote-41) It was also seen as a last attempt to create a legacy for himself and was not widely respected.[[42]](#footnote-42) This gave him less maneuverability as he did not have the public mandate to commit America to support this process long-term. Additionally, as it was nearing the end of his term, there was a lack of consistency or trust that comes with working with one administration. Further exacerbating this lack of trust was the fact that he had made statements regarding how he would not make commitments on behalf of the incoming administration.[[43]](#footnote-43) This meant that America was unable to be an effective signatory or mediator, as they were not willing to hold parties accountable for breaking any treaties created.

These two examples demonstrate the impact and importance of American domestic politics on mediation attempts. In order for American presidents to have successful negotiations, they need to ensure that they have the mandate to mediate and are committed to involvement in this conflict long-term. Without this, belligerent parties are unable to trust the results of negotiations and may not take them seriously. A public mandate allows American negotiators to commit more resources to the mediation process, as the public is in support of this, and would not punish them electorally for this resource allocation. Mediation is expensive, and without the time and resources expended during the negotiation process, it would be impossible.

A second important factor in mediation is the context of the specific conflict being mediated, and policy solutions available to American mediators. Conflicts which are easier to solve are more likely to attract mediators as it is less domestically risky for them to attempt to negotiate these.[[44]](#footnote-44) Additionally, mediations require the belligerent parties to agree to give up a degree of their sovereignty, and some of their beliefs to have a negotiated solution.[[45]](#footnote-45) The conflicts in Northern Ireland and Israel-Palestine were different in terms of the difficulty of negotiations. In Northern Ireland, policy solutions to the conflict were obvious to negotiators. European integration and the European Union (EU) made the terms easier to agree upon. This is because EU membership allowed for a soft border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.[[46]](#footnote-46) Hard borders throughout the conflict had been a major flashpoint and having this soft border allowed for one arena of conflict to be eliminated.[[47]](#footnote-47) Additionally, it was a shared belief between the governments in London and Dublin that Northern Ireland should have a degree of autonomy and this basis allowed for a place to start negotiations.[[48]](#footnote-48) The situation on the ground made policy solutions easier to create, and mediation easier to achieve.

In Israel-Palestine, there were no clear and agreed-upon policy solutions available to mediators. Firstly, the issue of settlements meant dividing territory was difficult, as scattered Jewish neighbourhoods made clear divisions of territory challenging.[[49]](#footnote-49) Governance by neighbourhood is difficult, and these settlements made a two-state solution difficult to create. Additionally, there were multiple proposed solutions for a basis for peace agreements, including two-state and one-state solutions.[[50]](#footnote-50) As both parties had different ideas for what policy should look like in the territory following any negotiations, any mediated agreements were harder to achieve.

These two examples demonstrate that the degree of difficulty in creating policy solutions affects the effectiveness of mediation. A lot of focus in mediation studies is on how the mediations themselves function, and the actors involved in these. However, the actual policy solutions are just as important. In cases where solutions are more obvious or there is a shared ground upon which to negotiate, successful mediation is easier to achieve, and thus Americans should be more willing to be involved in situations where this is the case, and more cautious in getting involved in conflicts where there are no pre-existing policy solutions.

A third important factor in mediation is the time at which negotiations occur. During a conflict, parties will be less likely to be interested in a negotiated solution if they believe they will win, as winning means they achieve all their objectives while negotiating would mean they would need to make some concessions. In Northern Ireland, the time was right for a negotiated solution. By the 1990s there was a recognition from both the Republicans and Unionists that neither side was going to win the war. Republicans were never going to be able to overthrow a much more powerful British army and government, and Unionists were never going to be able to get rid of the Republican revolutionaries.[[51]](#footnote-51) As such, there was a recognition that the only solution was to negotiate peace. This stage of being tired of conflict meant that negotiations could be held and were effective.

The conflict in Israel-Palestine was not stable, conflict was not slowing, and parties had not accepted they would not win. At the time of negotiations, political leaders, such as Barak and Clinton were leaving, causing difficulty regarding who to negotiate with, as there was no trust that the negotiations would remain stable with the next leader.[[52]](#footnote-52) Additionally, conflict was not slowing and was still heating up as this was a period of the Second Intifada, a major Palestinian Uprising against Israel starting in 2000.[[53]](#footnote-53) This changing situation made it difficult for negotiations as the situation on the ground was changing, with territory changing hands, and new issues created. Finally, the parties had not accepted that they were going to be unable to win the war. This conflict was still being viewed as an existential one, where if they lost their nation would cease to exist, and thus, there was no motivation for them to give up the fight, as states have an interest in self-preservation.[[54]](#footnote-54) There was a belief that if either side kept fighting, they would have the potential to win, further discouraging a negotiated solution as parties were not ready to accept concessions.

These cases demonstrate the importance of the right time for a negotiated agreement to be made. In the case of Northern Ireland parties were interested in having a mediated settlement. However, in Israel-Palestine, this was not the case, as the conflict was moving, active, and parties were not prepared to give up fighting. In all negotiations Americans are considering becoming involved in, it is important to consider the state the conflict is at and negotiate it at the correct time. These examples demonstrate that regardless of the effort American mediators put in, they were unlikely to have successful negotiations if the parties were not yet ready or interested.

**Conclusion**

 These two mediation attempts by Clinton achieved vastly different results. In the case of Northern Ireland, mediation was held at a good time in American domestic politics, there were practical policy solutions available, and it was a good point in the conflict to engage in mediation attempts. Comparatively, in Israel-Palestine mediation was a failure. It was a poor time in domestic politics, policy solutions were difficult to find, and it was bad timing in the conflict itself. For future mediation attempts, these three factors should be examined in depth before American mediators attempt to get involved. Mediation has costs for all parties and should be done at a time when it is likely to achieve some degree of success. If the conditions are not primed for success, there should be caution exercised in terms of entering mediation attempts.

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