

PWPA USA: Interview with Professor Alon Ben Meir - Israeli Palestinian Relations

Frank Kaufmann
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Dr. Alon Ben Meir is a professor at New York University's Center for Global Affairs and Senior Fellow at the World Policy Institute. Ben-Meir is an expert on Middle East and West Balkan affairs, international negotiations, and conflict resolution. In the past two decades, Ben-Meir has been directly involved in various backchannel negotiations involving Israel and its neighboring countries and Turkey.

We are most fortunate to have Professor Ben Meir for an interview on his forthcoming *World Affairs* article, "The Case for an Israeli-Palestinian-Jordanian Confederation, Why Now and How?"

Please listen to this important conversation here:

For those wish to watch the video of this conversation, please watch here:

Please read more on Professor Ben Meir here:

About Alon Ben-Meir



Dr. Alon Ben Meir is a professor at New York University's Center for Global Affairs and Senior Fellow at the World Policy Institute. Ben-Meir is an expert on Middle East and West Balkan affairs, international negotiations, and conflict resolution. In the past two decades, Ben-Meir has been directly involved in various backchannel negotiations involving Israel and its neighboring countries and Turkey. Ben-Meir is featured on a variety of television networks and also regularly briefs at the U.S. State Department for the International Visitors Program. He writes a weekly article that is syndicated globally. Dr. Ben-Meir has authored seven books related to Middle

East and is currently working on two new books about Syria and Turkey. Ben-Meir holds a master's degree in philosophy and a doctorate in international relations from Oxford University. Ben-Meir is on Facebook at [@ABenMeir](#), and Twitter at [@AlonBenMeir](#).

Dr. Frank Kaufmann, President of the Professor's World Peace Academy: Welcome Professor, great to have you back again with the Professor's World Peace Academy. We got part of the way last time, and I've been waiting for the chance to continue your thoughts on this very innovative and very promising initiative.

Prof. Alon Ben Meir: Thank you very much. I'm delighted to be back with you again.

Dr. Kaufmann: Thanks. In the interim, you've sent me a soon to be published article. And this is the foundation of a few questions I'd like to ask you and help our listeners understand more clearly what you're recommending for this seemingly intractable area of the world. And hopefully, with your contribution. maybe that adjective will dissolve a little bit and not be so intractable.

Prof. Meir: I hope so.

Dr. Kaufmann: We all hope and pray this is a dream, everyone hopes and prays for that. So I'm just gonna go straight into some of my thoughts and questions. The name of the article is *The Case for an Israeli, Palestinian Jordanian Confederation. Why now, and How?* And you mentioned to me that this is soon to be published. Can you say a word just about where it's headed, and where readers will find out?

Prof. Meir: It is going to be published online this coming week, which is going to be in print in the *World Affairs* Journal.

Dr. Kaufmann: Excellent.

Prof. Meir: And come out March, first week of March. And around that, we are going to have a conference in DC to further elaborate and discuss with a number of other guests and speakers, scholars, about the essence of these proposals. And, further investigate and explore what are the possibilities of making, hopefully of course, to see, so you have some kind of inroad into the Israeli and Palestinian

thinking. Because I feel all along that after 70 plus years, it is time to think out of the box, considering very carefully what has transpired on the ground for the last 70 years, what can be reversed, what cannot be reversed. And in so doing come to a certain conclusion that is, given these new facts on the ground, what are the prospects for a solution that can work, that can still satisfy the aspiration of the parties in the company. Namely, Israelis and the Palestinian in particular, while preserving of course, the independence and integrity of Israel as a country, while allowing the Palestinian also to have their own independence as a country.

Dr. Kaufmann: Beautiful, excellent. So that's news, that there will be a conference following the World Affairs publication in March.

Prof. Meir: Correct. It is going to be in the first week, on March 18 to be exact.

Dr. Kaufmann: Beautiful.

Prof. Meir: It is going to be Zoom, you know, for all of us to receive.

Dr. Kaufmann: Will it be available for viewers to see?

Prof. Meir: Yes, it will be available for viewers. We can advertise that as soon as all the details.

Dr. Kaufmann: Excellent. And will it be called what's called a hybrid meeting where there'll be some present or it's purely a Zoom conference?

Prof. Meir: That has not been decided at this point. But there will definitely be scholars from the Middle East and politicians. So, all will be involved via Zoom. And potentially there could be some people present, in fact, at the venue itself in DC.

Dr. Kaufmann: Excellent. So this is great news. And for my listeners and viewers here, we will carry the publication of the advertisement and make the way for viewers to follow up with this interview and follow the conference when it happens in March.

Prof. Meir: That would be terrific. Thank you. yes.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yeah. I'm very excited to learn that. *World Affairs* will carry this.

Prof. Meir: It is in print as well as online.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yes. So, it's kind of the spring issue. I would guess March.

Prof. Meir: It is exactly right. Spring issue. All of this is in fact a journal about foreign affairs, it's existed for many, many decades now.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yes.

Prof. Meir: And it's really good to be able to have it published in that journal particularly.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yeah, it's one of the great ones. I remembered all my life as a student. There was a necessity, we were always in it. And congratulations for that. That's where good thinkers need to be because your proposal is important. I'm glad it was picked up. I'm wondering another question I had really quick at the outset is, can you say a word about the history of the research of the particular piece? Has it evolved, was it published in part, has it changed? This particular forthcoming article, just a little history of the very document itself.

Prof. Meir: Well, you know, I have been involved in Israeli policy from various angles. Directly in talking to officials from both sides over many, many years, I have written on the subject, I daresay, maybe 300 articles, over the last, I'm not kidding, over the last 25 years or so. So in my opinion, I'm a student of that particular conflict. My fear itself is the conflict resolution. And to me, regardless how intractable any topic might be, if the parties are interested in one form or another, to bring an end to it, a happy ending to that, then a solution will have to be found, provided that both people have looked very, very carefully at what is on the ground, what has changed, what is reversible, what cannot be reversed, and be realistic. And, I emphasize the word realistic, that is not engaged in pipe dreams, in terms of many Israelis today still think we can maintain the status quo indefinitely. Well, I disagree with that, it cannot be maintained indefinitely. Or some Palestinian extremists who want to liquidate Israel altogether. And that's another illusion. Israel will not be liquidated by Palestinian or Iranian, you know, any other power for that matter, because Israel is a powerful country. It's a nuclear power for all intended purposes, you know?

Dr. Kaufmann: Yes

Prof. Meir: So many people engage in an illusion about how you can sustain a certain position in this particular case, the current as I said, step is not sustainable. Which means, we now have to look at the reality and say, given what we see, given what reality is today, how can we approach it, in order to find a solution that will maintain, this is very important point here, maintain the independence and integrity of the countries involved, specifically Israel now and Jordan, now no compromises will be there and meet the Palestinian aspiration to have their own independent country. But given the inter-relation, given the geographically, in terms of geographically, national security, the demographics, given this reality, then I've come to the conclusion is, in fact, no other way that you can confer reach a solution, unless you have some kind of an arrangement, a framework, whereby all three need to continue to cooperate. As we look today, at the reality there, we see various, today including a fully collaborate with the Palestinian Authority on many, many matters of national security. Israel and Jordan, collaborate on that aspect on a day-to-day basis. All three constantly interact with one another on a number seven today, even before there is a grid.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yes.

Prof. Meir: That is if you're going to find the solution, you're going to have to consider the fact that these are the three countries basically they have a contiguous landmass. There are Palestinians existing in Jordan, a significant number nearly 50% in the West Bank, in Jerusalem, in Israel proper, in Gaza. There are Jews in the West Bank in Jerusalem in Israel proper, obviously. There is also the intermingling of the dispersed population of the Israelis and Palestinians. And hence, when you look at these facts on the ground, and geographically, demographically, national security concerns, then you're still captive. In conclusion, there's a solution we'll have to maintain that collaboration that exists today, but further expand it. And so I went to meet the Palestinian aspiration for a state of the art, which in my view, we will never give up on that desire, that desperation.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yes. I think one of the real strengths and real promise of your proposal is its realism. That's one of the things that I always feel. For every word on the page, it's grounded in a realistic assessment. And you mentioned your critique of pipe dreams of those groups that imagine some sort of one-sided outcome is possible. And you insist that that's not and I think most people by now would lean that way or should actually be in that camp; a one-sided solution is not sustainable. So, the name of the article is *An Israeli, Palestinian Jordanian Confederation*. I found late in the article, a single phrase, which I pulled out as a kind of a nickname for the article which reads, 'Ending the Israeli Palestinian conflict based on a two state solution under the umbrella of a confederation'. And that's kind of the whole thing right there. While you were speaking just a minute ago, you mentioned three, you constantly mentioned three. And we both know what that is, but maybe for the listeners, what's that secret ingredient? What's the three, when people talk about just Israel and Palestine.

Prof. Meir: And that is Jordan. Because, Jordan is very much an integral part, you might say, of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The truth of the matter is, you have such significant, in fact, almost a majority of Palestinian. If you look at the Jordanian population 50% or more are of Palestinian descent. When it comes to national security, as I indicated earlier, Israel and Jordan collaborate very, very closely with Jordan on all matters of national security. So do the Palestinian. Given this relationship, a solution cannot [inaudible 12:30] be built on. And that is where I feel the prospect of eventually I'm hoping, of course, eventually, all three come to the same conclusion. As long as none of them is going to give up any aspect of their independence. You see, by definition, confederation is preserving the integrity of the states involved, while collaborating on all matters where they all have unique interest, especially.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yeah.

Prof. Meir: An added quality measure to the existence of their independence as a country.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yeah. This is another thing that struck me as extremely promising and insightful about your piece is elevating Jordan, as a kind of a co-equal. You don't discuss any part of the problem without including Jordan at every turn. Whether you're talking about security, whether you're talking about borders. And I even took notes to myself, I call that genius in a way.

Prof. Meir: I don't know about that.

Dr. Kaufmann: Is it new to use, is it old? Forgive my ignorance on that. I'm involved in the region, I've been involved in peace work, and they always include Jordan as should help or is related, but not so integral as I find in this proposal.

Prof. Meir: It is a very, very much integral part of any Israeli policy because of the interconnectedness on so many different levels. And that is why. And, I mentioned to you that I discussed this with the Jordanian officials. And, their reaction was rather amazing, the positive. That is with some questions being raised in terms of whatever this or whatever that without going into these details, I can tell you that there is a tremendous positive response to this reaction, to this kind of proposal. Because, Israelis know

these laws and the center, certainly center, left of center, not the extremist right of center. Jordanian know as well as the Palestinian know that what is happening today already forms the foundation for a future, expanded collaboration between the three parties. They know that, but you have still Israelite extremists as well as Palestinian extremists who still want to have it. And that is the main stumbling point here. And that is what I feel if the majority of Israelis as well as Palestinians, who actually believe that the solution will eventually require an independent Palestinian state, we want that majority to be more listened to, and able to project and make sure that the extremism in this particular case, it simply will get nowhere. So 73 to 72 years of conflict is long enough. That is unless we move, we think out of the box, and find a solution. Again, that means the aspiration of all three parties without too many compromises, then it can work. And that is really the focus of that I attempted to do this.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yeah. I think that anytime one talks about the external parts of international relations, one can avoid a little bit of the touch of national self-interest. It has to be an element that is driving the players to make the compromises and seek the advances that it has to ultimately benefit all parties. And I think what you do, the identification of that, so many of the Jordanian population are Palestinian, and also the refugee issue that Jordan has, is always kind of hovering in the shadows. I think Jordan has a very big stake in the success of such a proposal or the settlement of that relationship in Israel and Palestine.

Prof. Meir: Exactly right. Although the vast majority of Jordanians are Jordanian citizens.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yes.

Prof. Meir: Still at least 100,000 or so have that refugee status, so to speak. And this really was done actually deliberately I might say, because Jordan wants to make sure that the Palestinian refugee problem ought to be resolved. And also party to that problem. And in my proposal, of course, I address that. That is, I made it, you know, raised the question, and making it very clear that the solution to the Palestinian refugees rest on one thing. That is, resettlement and or compensation. And this is something that everybody who is practical and really understands says there is no other solution. That is, our seniors who are refugees, wherever they may be, be there Lebanon, Israel, Chile, the minority mind, can actually the one that we certainly can go back to a Palestinian state in the West Bank or Gaza, they can actually do so. Those who do not want to relocate, they will be properly compensated. This fits, you know, this is what Jordan would like to see happen, this is what the Palestinian Authority would like to see happen. Because, they know that the so-called right of return is entirely out of the question, you know?

Dr. Kaufmann: Yes.

Prof. Meir: Israel simply cannot accept 5 million Palestinian refugees and still remain a Jewish or the National Jewish identity. This simply isn't going to happen.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yeah.

Prof. Meir: They know that. And therefore, the solution was probably you know compensation and or relocation, and that's how you're going to solve it. Obviously, this can require tens of billions of dollars, which again, I feel very strongly that the international community in particular those who have a stake in the region, the EU and the United States, will be able to raise that kind of money to begin the process of resettling the Palestinian refugees, that is going to be a necessary part of our proposal.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yeah. I saw that in your article, there's a section dedicated to those stakeholders and their responsibility, or their, not responsibility but that they would be central to the necessary monies needed for resettlement and for monetary or compensation, as you say.

Prof. Meir: Exactly what you mentioned. You know what that is where you would like to send them to the public. And they believe that Palestinian have the right to have stuff to say. So does the United States. Every administration to this very one, by the discretion, still talking about the right of the Palestinian is never said about. So the states that they have in the region, the EU or the United States, want peace because they have vested interest in that region. And they will also protect that kind of interest. Security, resources, or trade, all of this is very important for the EU as well as the United States, so that the national interests of Jordan is to end the conflict, which means future prosperity and growth in so many different areas for the Palestinian, that's the same. So, when you put the three together, and you look at the human resources, and the natural resources they can have together, that's come to impact, revolutionize the Middle East you know because of the resourcefulness, as I said, of all three parties together. And once you have this kind of a peace agreement, of course, many other Arab countries, in fact, the vast majority of them will be supported. And we have already seen a progress in that regard for different Arab states already recognizes well back when United Arab Emirates, Morocco, and the Sudan, because they also understand Israel is a reality that cannot be wished away, just like some Palestinian extremists feel. And by making this kind of move on, so they signal to the Palestinian, you better modify your position, because Israel is there to stay and we are willing, we want to collaborate with Israel, because Israel has so much to offer to the region in technology and trade in a variety of fields, from which the Palestinian

currently benefit, where they can benefit far more under conditions of peace. The same thing, of course, with Jordan. So this is what I feel, given these facts there is that desire. Only, they don't want to speak about it publicly. And what I'm trying to do is let's bring this up, let's discuss it so that people will be able to discuss it publicly.

Dr. Kaufmann: Excellent.

Prof. Meir: Because, what is important here is the public. It's the public narrative we'll have to change on the part of three parties.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yes.

Prof. Meir: In fact, okay. This is because officials had to talk about what's inevitable.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yeah.

Prof. Meir: Inevitable because this is what exists. It will continue to exist, and then they have to make a choice. We have to ask both Israelis and Palestinians, do we want to exist killing each other for another 70 years, or do we want to coexist and live peacefully and grow and prosper together?

Dr. Kaufmann: Yes.

Prof. Meir: These are the only options now. There are no others.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yeah. You've introduced a massive hurdle in almost all political affairs, especially contentious political affairs, is this silence, the fear of speaking out for peace, because of the big clamor behind you to hold the old hostilities. And, it's a beautiful thought that the work you're doing, the conference, the writing, is actually allowing people to get a little bit saying what everyone feels but won't say. It's really...

Prof. Meir: Exactly.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yeah. I think as I'm listening to both of us here, I think that the hearer might be thinking, well, the professor is identifying more clearly the reality and more clearly the benefits of a prospect of greater collaboration or move towards peace. But I'd like the readers to know that it isn't just greater clarification, you've introduced something that I think is quite novel, correct me if I'm wrong, and this is the notion of 'Confederation'. I think it's a very different notion than just recommending that these countries see the benefit and work together more clearly. It's a genuinely novel and complex recommendation for political structures and relations that you've introduced with this notion of Confederation.

Prof. Meir: That's right. Because, you know, I asked myself the question, what is it going to take? Given as I said earlier, given the fact that they're not going to go anywhere, given the fact that they have no choice but to collaborate, given the fact that there is interdependence. Look, for example, today, more than 100 and 130, 140,000 Palestinian cross to the Israeli side to work in Israel itself. Even from Gaza, just imagine, very few people know. In fact, tens of thousands of Palestinian from Gaza, which is presumably the foremost enemy, and the Hamas, they have no choice because they need Palestinian to make money. Israel is allowing tens of thousands of them to cross to Israel, and work in Israel and go back every single day. So that even under the tense conditions today between Hamas and Israel, we still have that collaboration, because it is necessary, and both benefit from. The question comes in; how do you make sense? I speak to people from Hamas, for example. Whereas publicly they say, 'We are against the existence of the State of Israel altogether'. And I ask them openly, clearly, tell me, 'Do you really think you can get rid of the State of Israel?' They said, 'No, we know we cannot'. 'So, why are you preaching this gospel?' They say, 'Well, this is our opening position. This is our position because we have rights, and we don't want to start with a basic right, we're going to ask for more'. This is like a negotiation tactic. They understand Israel, right? They understand that Israel cannot be overwhelmed by whatever thousands or tens of thousands of practices that they might have. They understand all of that. Because Israel can, well go into Gaza and take it over if they choose to, but Israel doesn't want to do that, for its own consideration. Which means the silt and all of this in the background, they understand. And now what I'm trying to do is come up, you know, talk about what's real and what's not real. Talk about what you want, and what you don't want openly, but be realistic, in a sense, what you can change, what you cannot change. So when I asked this question, can you really stand up? So it's clear enough, and they know, and they say this themselves. And that is why I feel that for example, if the United States takes a certain initiative in this regard, which is in my view, would be important, and introduce the United States to adopt that position. But instead, I'm talking to the State Department, I can tell you this, and as expressed the spirit, why not? They say, 'Well, the time is not right to start with the process of reconciliation'. And I say, 'This is exactly what you need'. That is, you cannot come today and say, 'Let's get together and create

a confederation'. You need the process of reconciliation first. Which means what? That is beginning a process where the people will further interact with one another on a regular basis.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yes.

Prof. Meir: Yeah. We want to see Palestinian go to Israel. We want to see more trade open; we want to see Jordanian tourism going upward. We want to see sports activities together. So that, the people themselves begin to understand each other as people rather than just merely listening to their political leaders.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yes. There are a couple of things in what you just said that I'd like to speak to. One is, for the sake of, again, intensifying or creating bright lines in this conversation for our hearers. What is the difference between three countries just cooperating and the notion of confederation? What are some of the characteristics of confederation that will enhance the likelihood of these outcomes that you're describing?

Prof. Meir: Well, you know, the confederation in this regard, the collaboration is where as I said, by definition of confederation, maintain the integrity of the independence of all three parties. But there are issues whereby I think Jerusalem is a very good example.

Dr. Kaufmann: Okay.

Prof. Meir: Well, no one, sane person, can tell you that can Israel control all of Jerusalem at all times under any circumstances? Why? They had the Muslim shrine, they had the Arab shrine. Well, these have been there for more than a 1000 years, Israel acknowledges that. The Hashemite Kingdom that is Jordan being the custodian of this. So, Jordan has...an interest in these holy shrines. The Palestinian have an interest in this holy shrine, and Israel has its own holy shrine as well. So here, you have an area where all three parties have a very significant concern and interest in Jerusalem. How do you separate them? Which means the confederation notion is that these three, in fact, would need to collaborate. They collaborate today.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yeah.

Prof. Meir: Because they know there is no other choice. So therefore, take for example, security. If Jerusalem is going to eventually become a capital of two states, well, you cannot separate that by building walls. That is, the city would have to remain united under any circumstances. And mind you, Israelis as well as Palestinians agree that dividing the city is utterly out of the question. But then how do you deal, for example, with issues, with the electrical grid, with crime? Suppose somebody commits a crime in East Jerusalem and escapes to West Jerusalem, how do you deal with it? My suggestion is under the confederation proposal, we also have a commission made by both sides, composed of both sides where they can deal with issues that arise as a result of the fact that this is at the capital of a two-independent state. Therefore, it is not merely collaborating, cooperating on various issues on a day-to-day basis, but confederation is a longer term collaboration, and it is set into the agreement itself.

Dr. Kaufmann: It's a more comprehensive concept, political concept. It's not a collection of positive things, it's an umbrella under which all of these can start to cohere.

Prof. Meir: Umbrella that and it governs that for indefinitely.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yeah.

Prof. Meir: That's the difference. There will not be situation and condition where so today for example, Israel can collaborate with the Palestinian on security matters. But suppose there is a new government, or there is a new city? With a system we are not losing ground whenever a new person is elected.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yes, it gives us stability.

Prof. Meir: But you have a confederation, this becomes a permanent agreement between the three guys, and they will need to collaborate. Because, that is part and parcel of the creation of this entity.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yes. It's enduring, it's not contingent upon the goodwill of a good leader or a bad leader. It's a new political structure and concept.

Prof. Meir: Exactly. It's not subject to change on a day-to-day basis, depending on the political situation that exists, but depending on the political orientation of a leader from either three parties.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yes.

Prof. Meir: This is an existing entity, regardless of which government comes aware, they adhere to the same agreement, because it is becoming constitutionally binding.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yes. I don't want to push too much just on this issue. But do you think you're recommending an unprecedented or hitherto non-existing political concept? And here's the rest of the question. In the United States, we have the 10th Amendment, we have States' rights, and we're seeing it play out now, especially with elections, and then health and things like that. But it's the United States. Another Confederation, of course, is Switzerland that has its I forget these four. What do they call that? I should...

Prof. Meir: Yes.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yeah. And then you have something much looser, where you have something like the Miracle Sewer, their contract for contiguous, but it's mostly an economic agreement. They don't really have a lot of strife between them anyway. So the thing you're describing here, it's neither like the US nor like Switzerland. It's not really an economic cooperative regional thing. Is it unprecedented in your mind?

Prof. Meir: Well, I think that is in totality. You know, we don't have this kind of example. Because in totality, when you look at elements of it, yes, in many cases, they do exist and there is confederation, absolutely. If we look at the totality of the idea, it doesn't exist. And that is an aberration, it can never possibly happen. Again, going back to what is happening today, and today, I mean I have to ask the question, what is happening today, can you change that? Can you actually change that? And the answer will be no, you cannot change it, you can only actually augment it to make it better. And that's an idea here. I asked the Israeli Palestinian Jordanian what we really have is interesting interest to maintain what there is and further develop it. The answer is categorically, yes. We have a vested interest in the current reality. But given that there is no permanent solution to the Israeli Palestinian conflict, then that interest could be subject to change. Because, we need to solve that conflict. But I'm saying that, since you have a vested interest in the current reality, then the idea is to improve upon it rather than diminish it. And then... if I have a vested interest in something that I have today, I would like to keep it. But I know one thing, if I don't solve some other issues involved, I may not be able to maintain it, then I'm going to have to try to improve upon. This is exactly what I'm telling the Israelis. You have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo because it serves you, there is no day- to-day bloodshed between you and the Palestinians. But if you know that this has to change, because the Palestinian will not sit forever, you're going to have to do something about it to prevent that from happening and hence you have to improve on it. And that improvement will translate to giving the Palestinian right to establish the status quo.

Dr. Kaufmann: Very good. Another important aspect of your proposal is that you describe a five to seven- year anticipatory period, what did you call it? I have the notes here.

Prof. Meir: I call it the...

Dr. Kaufmann: *Process of Reconciliation?* Yes. And is there anything that we should know before we get a chance to read your piece, anything about this five to seven-year? Its promise, its pitfalls, its dangers, its necessity vis-a-vis the prospect of such an emerging confederation.

Prof. Meir: Yeah. You see, given the continuing acrimonious narrative, and you hear the cries of specifically coming from [inaudible 38:11] and some elements of even a Palestinian Authority, given the doubt, given the distress, that continue to exist, regardless of how much with the number now, you're going to need a process whereby the people themselves, Israelis, Palestinians, begin to see each other as a human being. You know, it's funny, if you go today to Israel to ask a child at 10 years old to describe a Palestinian. Do you know what they say? A Palestinian is a terrorist. And if you go to the West Bank and ask a child the same age, 'What do you think of Israelis?' They will tell you Israeli is a soldier with a gun who wants to kill us. That's the perception. And so what you need to do is to change the mindset. And you cannot change it by simply sitting and making an agreement overnight, or within a few months, and now we have a configuration. This is what we're going to do; the public mindset ought to be changed over time. And that, you need a process of reconciliation. Which means you have to undertake scores and scores of people to people activities on a regular basis. And that is what I call a reconciliation. So that the Palestinian sees Israelis as human beings, want to live, want to prosper, want to grow, they can be trusted. And Israelis also can see the Palestinians as people who want to live in peace, want to grow and prosper, and they can be trusted, that requires a process. And that's why from my experience from looking at other conflicts between various people, we realize that you need that kind of process before you can actually sit down, and say, this is where we can now make a decision about in terms of the confederation. Which means that both parties need to only have one thing in advance, that towards the end of this process, we are going to create that kind of activity. So there is a goal, this is a process, this is a road. Your destination is Los Angeles, where this is the road you're gonna have to take. And you have to develop the mechanism, the steps, the measures necessary to reconcile between the people, in order for them to begin to develop trust with one another, and end suspicions as the concern and build on it. And so when they come to the point where this confederation can be created, you have already created the foundation People-to-People, which is critical, before you can actually reach the end game.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yeah. That's another thing, I think, that is extremely important in what you're doing here is the world, all of our lives, Professor, we've seen nothing but human to human exchanges and reconciliation efforts. But what you've added is a clear end game, a clear end goal, so that it isn't just the tireless kind of the pleasant, soft types who want to get to know the Jews or the Palestinians have always existed, they're always meeting somewhere or another and the like. But if you've concretized it into something that must be focused upon in a systematic way, because there is an outcome that is designed to be implemented eventually, in five to seven years, is that you've added the missing element.

Prof. Meir: Exactly. This is very important because if you have any end game and you know where you want to be five to seven years from now, then the measures you take, you also correct them as well because you want to remain consistent anywhere for your endgame.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yes.

Prof. Meir: So, all these measures, some of them work well, some of them do not work well. But you are not going to abandon it, because you have a clear principle and the end game. And that is why it is necessary to say you are working towards something rather than working, let's collaborate and see what happens. And see what happens, that's not good enough. Because there are many elements that can enter the equation over time, that can actually disrupt if not destroy, what you're trying to do.

Dr. Kaufmann: Exactly. It's extremely good. That element which makes the work realistic and systematic, and you can assess your progress. You can't just feel good every time you go have tea or coffee like that.

Prof. Meir: You build on it; you are building basically the building blocks...And if a certain block doesn't fit, we find a different block. But you have to continue to build.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yes.

Prof. Meir: That's the idea, it's building it back towards the end.

Dr. Kaufmann: You know, Professor, shockingly, the time has flown, I feel like we've just started. It's a pity, I have literally 20 more questions that are pressing to me. We can do this regularly because let's join the show. Let me be a part of five to seven years and meet you periodically.

Prof. Meir: Anytime you want to continue this discussion.

Dr. Kaufmann: Beautiful.

Prof. Meir: There's a lot more to be discussed because, you know, it is complex, it's still intractable in so many different ways. But you know, there is a stem, I believe, to goodwill, the goodwill of I dare say, even a majority on all sides, want to see an end. Majority want to see an end to this, because they know that the outcome could be magnificent. In fact, could translate the whole region. It will revolutionize the region as a matter of fact.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yes.

Prof. Meir: Because it will have a major repercussion and implication on other conflict resolution. This could be settled with Lebanon, could be settled with Syria. More Arab states will be jumping to recognize if you can revolutionize the entire region by achieving this point of stability.

Dr. Kaufmann: As well as exemplify paths for similar types of regions around the world that have similar types of long histories of conflict.

Prof. Meir: I mean, here is a good example. Who would have ever believed that in the wake of World War II, what Germany has done, today, Germany is the leading country in the EU? You know, the animosity between the French and the German, go back, you know, you know how...

Dr. Kaufmann: Yes.

Prof. Meir: but eventually they came to the conclusion that coexistence is inevitable. Now we have to make a choice no matter how many more centuries we have been stuck in this conflict.

Dr. Kaufmann: Inevitable and beneficial.

Prof. Meir: And beneficial.

Dr. Kaufmann: There's a final thought I'd like to hear from you and then we'll say thanks for this round. When you were describing calling the parties into a realistic point of view, you were describing

conversations with Palestinians in which you said, 'Do you really think you can ever make Israel go away'? And they say, 'No, we know it's not possible'. And so, this approach is somewhat a *via negativa*; we will never get what we really want so we'll work toward a more constructive relationship. Do you think it'll be ever possible that not only will people reluctantly say that, okay, we're gonna have these people around forever, but get to the point where they want to really feel, 'I want them to have their state, I want them to have their culture, I want them to have their place', so that the drive is not a reluctant realism, but actually a human desire for or growing to feel, wait a minute, these people also need a home, need a culture need a...? How do you see that possibility or the time frame or if at all?

Prof. Meir: I'll say I can answer this question to you with one thing we have done within the EU framework, they invited a group of Israelis, some former Palestinian scholars and ordinary people from as well as the Palestinians, and they asked me to get them together and see if we can develop a sort of a plan, how they can reach an agreement. And we formed our exercise, very quickly because I know we're running out of time. When we went into the room, the Palestinians were sitting on one side, the Israelis were sitting on the other side.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yes.

Prof. Meir: No intermingling between the two sides. So I came in. When I came in, the first thing I said was, 'You know what, before we get anything, please, I want you to mix up. You have to sit with one another'. And I'm gonna tell you the first two, three hours, you'll hear more acrimony against one another, you'll hear all kinds of accusations, we don't trust you guys. As the time passed, they began to understand because I was focusing on the human dimension, the psychological aspect of the conflict, the humanity in the conflict itself.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yes.

Prof. Meir: While they are there, they coexist. Why should they be different kinds? And then they realize a certain kind of love and recognition of each other, 'Hey, man'. When I tell you with all honesty, by four o'clock, two, three hours before the end of the session, you'll see them hugging each other...with tears in their eyes.

Dr. Kaufmann: Sure. Yeah.

Prof. Meir: I cannot believe it. Then I say, we cannot believe, we are brothers. We feel like brothers now.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yes.

Prof. Meir: That is a one-day transformation because they listened to each other, they listened to each other's concern, fear, anxiety, and then I just said, 'We are both humans, given the same aspiration, the same need, the same dreams'.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yeah.

Prof. Meir: And they are not necessarily compatible. They are not compatible because you're all human. We are in the same Arab region, the same place. To me that was one of the most globally amazing experiences I've had. And I mean people were watching, they were stunned to see the transformation within 12 hours. As long as you can put them together and ask them to just open their minds and see the humanity in each other.

Dr. Kaufmann: Yeah.

Prof. Meir: That's all.

Dr. Kaufmann: Beautiful. Well Professor, we're grateful for your long life of serving the cause of peace in our common humanity.

Prof. Meir: Thank you very much.

Dr. Kaufmann: Thanks for this time, and I can't wait till our next time together.

Prof. Meir: It is always my pleasure. Thank you so much. Bye.

Dr. Kaufmann: Thank you. God bless. Good night.

Prof. Meir: Thank you.



About Alon Ben-Meir

Dr. Alon Ben Meir is a professor at New York University's Center for Global Affairs and Senior Fellow at the World Policy Institute. Ben-Meir is an expert on Middle East and West Balkan affairs, international negotiations, and conflict resolution. In the past two decades, Ben-Meir has been directly involved in various backchannel negotiations involving Israel and its neighboring countries and Turkey.

Ben-Meir is featured on a variety of television networks and also regularly briefs at the U.S. State Department for the International Visitors Program. He writes a weekly article that is syndicated globally.

Dr. Ben-Meir has authored seven books related to Middle East and is currently working on two new books about Syria and Turkey. Ben-Meir holds a master's degree in philosophy and a doctorate in international relations from Oxford University.

Ben-Meir is on Facebook at [@ABenMeir](#), and Twitter at [@AlonBenMeir](#).

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