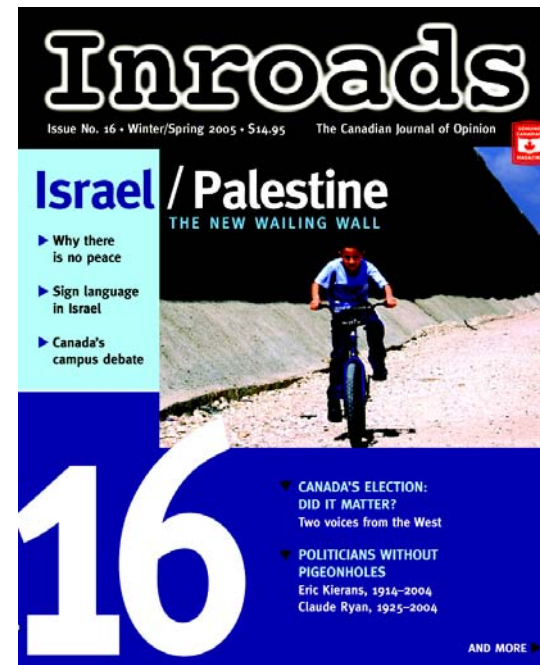


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Why is there no Israeli-Palestinian peace?

by Simon Rosenblum

ISRAEL/PALESTINE HAS BEEN HOTLY CONTESTED BY TWO NATIONAL movements. Both have legitimate claims, but have been unable to find historical accommodation. Are both equally at fault for the impasse, and what are the current prospects if any for a peaceful resolution of this century-old conflict?

Many have noted that the Israel/Palestine dispute is one of too little geography and too much history. In reaction perhaps to the burden of history, of late there has been a strong tendency to dissociate the conflict from its historical roots. To do so gives a very misleading picture: a basic historical perspective is necessary. I argue strongly that Israel was not created in sin. While the national rights of the indigenous Palestinian population were considerable, it must be remembered that all efforts for accommodation by moderate forces within the Zionist movement, including the bi-

nationalist tendency led by Martin Buber and others, met with nothing but rejection from the Palestinian community.

The Palestinian and larger Arab world rejected partition in 1947-48 – just as it had in 1937 on more favourable geographic terms – and tried to destroy the newly created State of Israel. As Benny Morris, the most prominent of the Israeli school of “new historians,” has convincingly shown in his book on the 1947-48 period, the Palestinian refugee situation, while complex, was created largely as a by-product of the Arab-initiated war itself – not by Israeli design. It

also needs to be said that Israel has not been an expansionist state. Rather, Israel has had to fight numerous defensive wars. The 1967 war was one such war. It resulted in Israel’s occupying the West Bank because King Hussein of Jordan rejected Israel’s pleas to stay out of that war. Following the 1967 war, the Israeli government of the day was prepared to withdraw from the vast majority of the newly occupied territories in exchange for a peace agreement, but met with the resounding three nos – no to negotiations, no to peace, no to Israel – from the Arab League. Such rejectionism characterized the PLO and much of the Arab world (the notable exception being Egypt) until the late 1980s, when at long last peace became a possibility.

The core of the Oslo Peace Process was a bargain in which the Palestinian Authority (PA) was promised a credible pathway to a viable independent state and Israel was promised security for both the state itself and its citizens. It has failed. An assessment of this failure is best begun at its end, when efforts to conclude a “final status” agreement came to a head four years ago at Camp David and Taba. Israel’s then Prime Minister Ehud Barak accepted and Yasir Arafat rejected the Clinton bridging proposal. It would have given the Palestinians a contiguous state in all of Gaza, in 97 per cent of the West Bank, plus the Arab parts of East Jerusalem (which along with neighbouring Palestinian villages would have become the capital of the new Palestinian state).

A troublesome disinformation campaign exists today, not only amongst Palestinians but also within a large part of the “left” in

Europe and North America, to deny what was on offer at Camp David and Taba. The campaign is disingenuous; the record is clear. In assessing what was on offer, the reader can choose among lead American negotiator Dennis Ross, the EU envoy (presently Spain’s Minister of Foreign Affairs), French writer Charles Enderlin, or PA Foreign Minister Nabal Shaath. All of them confirm the 97 per cent figure (really 94 per cent of the West Bank plus an additional 3 per cent taken from Israeli territory). Not-so-friendly-to-Israel journals, the Economist and the Guardian, also confirm what Arafat rejected. Back in 1995, a senior Palestinian advisor was heard to say in reference to the unofficial Beilin/Abu Mazen accord – which offered less to the Palestinians – that if only the Israelis would accept that arrangement it would be “the deal of the century.” Only five years later, the Palestinians passed on an even more generous deal. Wrong century I guess.

Dennis Ross’s masterful new book, *The Missing Peace*, is an 800-page memoir of his days as the principal American diplomat in the Middle East under first George Bush and then Bill Clinton. It is a must read for anyone trying to understand how the peace process failed. A few quotes from the prologue pretty much give away the tragic ending:

Our ideas [the Clinton Bridging Proposal] should have come as no surprise to either side; they represented our best judgement of what each side could accept in the end. We could not do better. Painful concessions were required on each side. Historic myths would

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have to give way to political necessity and reality on each side... The stakes were clear and the choices stark, or so they should have been to Yasir Arafat... But a comprehensive deal was not possible with Arafat. Too much redefinition was required. He was not up to it. He could live with a process, but not with a conclusion.

Identical conclusions can be found in Bill Clinton's autobiography *My Life*.

Why did Arafat reject this historic and honourable offer? Because the Palestinian Authority insisted on sole sovereignty over the Temple Mount and, most importantly, on a Palestinian refugee "right of return" to Israel itself. Not only did the Palestinian leadership forego that opportunity for peace making and nation building, it chose the path of violence, anti-Israel incitement and terrorism. For the last four years the region has witnessed a new and much more violent Palestinian intifada. Whether or not Arafat engineered this uprising, he clearly gave it much encouragement and has done almost nothing to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure within his jurisdiction.

One does not have to agree with everything that Israeli governments have done in response to these years of violence/terrorism to recognize that the State of Israel has a legitimate and overriding responsibility to protect its citizens. In the eyes of many of Israel's critics however, the largely inadvertent killing by Israeli forces of Palestinian civilians – usually in the course of shooting at Palestinian terrorists – is considered morally no different from the deliberate targeting of Israeli civilians by Palestinian suicide bombers. While the high numbers of Palestinian civilians killed during the past years may reflect poor political judgment or lax discipline on the part of some Israeli

troops – some Israeli military missions have been heavily questioned within Israel itself – it must be acknowledged that fighting and deterring terror is a most challenging and difficult task, resulting necessarily in the significant loss of human life.

I HAVE COME TO APPRECIATE THAT BRUTAL honesty and total clarity are necessary if peace making is to prosper.

A detour if you will. On May 19, 2004, Holy Blossom Synagogue in Toronto featured talks by Israeli Admiral (Ret.) Ami Ayalon, a former head of the Shin Bet (Israeli Intelligence), and Palestinian University President Sari Nusseibeh, a former Jerusalem representative of the PLO. They co-founded the People's Voice Initiative of which this writer is a great admirer. People's Voice is an Israeli-Palestinian civil initiative aimed at creating public support for a Statement of Principles for a permanent agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Publicly launched in June 2003, its leaders have attempted to enlist popular support on both sides. As of April 2004, more than 325,000 Israelis and Palestinians had signed on to the Statement of Principles. In summary, the Statement calls for the following:

- There will be two states for the two peoples.
- The borders will be based on the June 4, 1967, borders, with the possibility of mutually agreed territorial swap.
- Jerusalem will be the capital of both states. The Arab neighbourhoods of Jerusalem will be under Palestinian sovereignty, the Jewish neighbourhoods under Israeli sovereignty, and the holy basin under no sovereignty.

- Palestinian refugees will return only to Palestine. Jews will return only to Israel.
- The Palestinian state will be demilitarized.
- End of Conflict

At the meeting in Toronto, people raised questions about the extent of popular support for their program. Ayalon and Nusseibeh replied that both Israeli and Palestinian public opinion polls consistently show majority support for a solution based upon their parameters. But the underlying reality is much more complex. Israeli and Palestinian public opinion are far from symmetrical.

On the Israeli side, Ayalon was correct in saying that two thirds of Israelis seem to be in favour of, or at least willing to accept, such concessions. But – and this is a very big but – this is so only when they believe Israel truly has a peace partner, and that such a final status deal would be permanent. The bottom line is that Israeli public support is conditional, and the security environment must improve significantly before most Israelis will permit their latent dovishness again to come to the fore.

On the Palestinian side, Nusseibeh was also correct to point to some polls showing majority support for a two-state solution. But – and this is an even bigger but – this majority support drops significantly when it is in reference to a two-state solution without a Palestinian "right of return." This qualification is obviously critical and reveals the fragility of Palestinian support for the People's Voice principles. There is no equivalence between Israeli and Palestinian willingness to make major concessions for peace. The Palestinian leadership has failed miserably in this regard, and one cannot

simply wish the problem away.

On the "right of return" issue both Ayalon and Nusseibeh were asked if there were significant differences between their initiative and the better-known Geneva initiative led by Yossi Beilin and Yasser Abed-Rabbo. Their response was no: essentially it was just a matter of theirs being a short statement of principles and the other a detailed negotiating blueprint. Ayalon and Nusseibeh may have had good reasons for not wanting to discuss the Geneva initiative. But there is an important difference between the two documents. The People's Voice to its great credit is crystal clear and says unequivocally "Palestinian refugees will return only to Palestine." The Geneva document on the other hand is more ambiguous. On one hand, Israel is given a veto over how many Palestinian refugees it is willing to admit, but at the same time the Palestinians do not have to renounce their "right of return." The consequence would be very troublesome in that further claims could be made against Israel, although Israel would not be obliged to satisfy these claims. This does not easily mesh with an "end of claims, end of conflict" final settlement.

Now to my final point on Ayalon and Nusseibeh. The first question asked of them concerned extremists on both sides, and particularly the issue of terror. Both answered in a way that troubled me. Ayalon maintained that it is a matter of hope: when the Palestinians have hope, they don't turn to terror. He pointed to the relative quiet of 1998-99, before Camp David and Taba, as evidence. This is a most unsatisfying thesis. Yes, 1998-99 was a period of calm, but this was largely because Hamas and the Islamic Jihad thought they had effectively killed the peace process, not because hope was in the

air. Only for a period in 1996 – after numerous suicide bombings and after the Israeli government read him the riot act – did Arafat do anything of consequence to fight terror. By 1998-99, he had long ended this effort. If hope is the explanatory variable, it is most strange that terror returned in full measure just at a time when Israel at Camp David and Taba showed it was prepared to make enormous concessions for peace. No, terror marches to a very different beat, and hope will only take you so far.

On the same question, Nusseibeh minimized the terror issue: when Palestinians get their own state, they will be in a much better situation to control terror and the people will be much less supportive of terror organizations. This explanation too is problematic. To be blunt, after the violence of recent years, Israelis will not buy a pig in a poke. Well before agreeing to a People's Voice-type solution, Israelis will demand that the Palestinian Authority take serious measures against terror. Only when Israelis see evidence that the PA is making best efforts to dismantle the terror infrastructure will they be willing to make major concessions. Just as Nusseibeh clearly understands that Palestinians must agree now to trade away their "right of return," he must appreciate the Palestinians' need to confront terror. This cannot be postponed to a better day.

Are there political implications in all of the above? Many. Peace is regrettably much further away than Ayalon and Nusseibeh – and we – might hope for. "Mark my words," Dennis Ross reports telling Abu Ala (also known as Ahmed Queri, currently PA Prime Minister), "[the United States] will disengage from the issue and . . . you will have Sharon as Prime Minister. He will be elected for sure if there is no deal, and your 97 per cent will

become 40 to 45 per cent; your capital in East Jerusalem will be gone." Ross continues, "He looked at me sadly and with a note of complete resignation, replied, 'I am afraid it may take another 50 years to settle this now.'"

Since the collapse of the Oslo Peace Process there have been well intentioned peace plans: the American-initiated Mitchell, Tenet and Zinni plans, and more recently the Road Map sponsored by the so called Quartet group (the United States, Russia, EU and the UN). All have foundered primarily because, as UN envoy Roed-Larsen has recently put it, the PA "has made no progress on its core obligation to take immediate action to end violence and combat terror." Criticisms can of course be made regarding Israel's failure to dismantle settlement outposts and other matters but to quote the liberal Israeli newspaper Haaretz, these failings "pale in comparison to the roles played by Arafat and the terror organizations."

Since there is not as yet a serious Palestinian partner for a historic compromise – one in which Palestinians abandon both terror and the demand for refugee "return" – Israel must act unilaterally. The best example of this is, of course, the fence separating Israeli from Palestinian territories. Already fully in place in Gaza for some time, it has been effective in keeping terrorists out of Israel. The West Bank fence is doing likewise. Internationally, many decry the fence and compare it with the Berlin Wall. Let me be blunt: were Arafat your neighbour, you too would build a fence. The exact placement of the fence is a separate issue, and in a precedent-setting decision, Israel's Supreme Court ordered the Israeli government to change a large section of its West Bank separation barrier. The Court ruled that the



IMAGES FROM PALESTINE A shopkeeper in Rafah examines the damage left in his family store after an Israeli tank sprayed the main street. JON ELMER PHOTO

proposed route violates the human rights of the local Palestinian population. The government has agreed to adhere to the Court's ruling.

The other measure to effect change is unilateral disengagement which, the Economist says, "has become virtually the only hope for breathing life into the moribund process." In late summer of 2004, Israel appeared to be beginning a disengagement from much of the territories. First would be the Gaza phase. If that worked reasonably well, there would be pressure (internal and external) on the Israeli government to do likewise from much – say 75 per cent – of the West Bank. Israel's Deputy Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, had already come to this position. If terror can be contained, then I see disengagement as a serious possibility over the next couple of years. With that said, it would not take all that much to upset this strategy. Sharon faces severe problems in getting his own party to support even partial disengagement. Today, the prospects of disengagement seem less than 50 per cent. Disengagement in any case only

takes you so far, as it is by no means a process necessarily leading to a comprehensive peace.

Yossi Alpher, a prominent strategic analyst with strong dovish views, has identified the fundamental problem as "the inability of the Palestinian National Leadership, then as now, to come to terms with the real meaning of the partition of Palestine and the creation by the international community of separate Jewish and Arab states in the two people's historic homeland." To this day, Palestinians as a whole have no idea what was offered at Camp David or in the Clinton Plan. Misled to believe that Israel proposes nothing but endless occupation, Palestinians will see continued armed struggle as the only alternative. Told repeatedly that total victory is just and possible, and informed constantly that the whole world supports them, they are highly unlikely to opt for a moderate rethinking of their worldview. The hope for peace – which demands the genuine commitment of both people and their leaders – persists, but remains as elusive as ever. ■

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