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## ***Whither the Middle East and the Palestinian/Israeli Conflict?***

by  
**John Battersby\***

### **Defining the problem**

Eight years of trying to implement an internationally brokered land-for-peace deal between the Israelis and the Palestinians has been wiped out by 12 months of the latest Palestinian uprising (*intifada*) and the Israeli response with helicopter gunships, missiles and targeted assassinations. The areas of agreement reached in the 1993 Oslo peace process have been repeatedly undermined by successive Israeli violations of the tenuous Palestinian autonomy and crossing of the lines that are supposed to separate fully autonomous areas from those where the Israeli military still has a presence. The conflict has often taken on the outward signs of a conventional war. The Palestinian security forces, once regarded by Israel and the United States as the vanguard for implementing peace, are now the shock troops in a vicious war which appears set to escalate in the foreseeable future. It has already claimed the lives of at least 546 Palestinians and 157 Israelis, with the Israeli proportion of casualties on the rise in a conflict which has lasted for nearly one year.

The fundamental quest in the Middle East of the two Semite tribes who have lived on-and-off in the historical land of Palestine for several thousand years is the search for a homeland and security. The Jews thought they had found it when the state of Israel was created in the midst of conflict in 1948 and the Palestinians are still looking for their homeland and some kind of security 53 years later. The Jews have won the right-of-return to the places where they always lived whereas many Palestinians are still denied the right of return - or compensation - to the towns and villages where they were born and today lie inside Israel and even to those parts of the West Bank and Gaza still under Israeli control. Another complicating factor is that as many Jews (five million) live in the United States as do in Israel and more Palestinians (three to four million) live as refugees in Arab countries than do in the emerging Palestinian entity.

The rejection by the Arab world of the UN's 1947 partition solution for the creation of adjoining Palestinian and Jewish states (based on a 50/50 territorial split) with Jerusalem under international custodianship, led to a series of wars which were won militarily by Israel but have yet to find political and moral resolution. The conflict is both territorial and one of national identity. It is complicated by religious fundamentalism on both sides which is used to justify extreme solutions such as the destruction of the state of Israel and the ongoing violations of the human rights of Palestinians. The reality is that Jews, fleeing the horrors of the Nazi holocaust in the mid-1940s, accelerated the Zionist impulse for the creation of an exclusively Jewish state without calculating - or making provision for - the cost in terms of Palestinian suffering.

The real war in the Middle East is a propaganda war. The majority of the public that makes up Israel's main sponsor, the United States, has only the vaguest grasp of the complex history of Palestine and does not regard Palestine - or the Palestinian-state-in-the-making - as >occupied territory= which in turn forms the basis of several UN resolutions which would restore a Palestinian state. And large bodies of public opinion in the Arab world do not acknowledge the right of Israel to exist as an exclusively Jewish state in the middle of the Arab world although most Arab governments pay lip service to this acknowledgement. As a result of these dual realities, the US government and Arab governments are not under sufficient public pressure to make the kind of changes which would fundamentally shift the balance of power in the Middle East in a way that both sides would have no option but to compromise.

Both Israel and the Palestinians can continue to blame each other while their sponsors wait for mutual exhaustion to set in. The changing domestic situations in both Israel and the United States are the key factors which will change the balance-of-power over time. In Israel, there are four major factors: a) the dilution of the Jewish state through massive Russian immigration; b) the dilution of military service and the Hebrew language as bonding agents; c) the passing of a generation with a direct memory of the holocaust; and d) globalisation - and in particular its impact on youth culture and values - which is also contributing to change in Israel. In the United States, the bonds between American Jewry and Israel are getting weaker and the US public's appetite for spending vast sums on Israel each year could wane in the years ahead. Although a land-for-peace deal was struck in 1993 - leaving the major issues such as Jewish settlers, Palestinian refugees and final boundaries unresolved - the necessary degree of trust to coax Israel towards a fully inclusive democracy has never been achieved. Hence, settlement efforts have reverted to civil war based on the struggle for land which Israel has failed to relinquish in terms of the peace accord although opinion polls at highpoints in the process have indicated up to 70 per cent of Israelis are in favour of the peace process. For Israel, it remains a numbers game.

At last July's Camp David II talks, two significant advances were recorded. Israeli and Palestinian delegates reached a behind-the-scenes agreement in principle on a formula for compensating Palestinians who were driven out of Israel in 1948 and 1967, thus opening the way to a symbolic agreement on the right of return of Palestinian refugees. And secondly, then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered the prospect of Israelis and Palestinians sharing Jerusalem as the capital of their respective states.

While both of these were contained in a secret draft

agreement negotiated between then Minister of Economy and Planning, Yossi Beilin, and the Palestinian chief negotiator, Abu Mazen, the plan was never endorsed by the late Yitzhak Rabin, who was due to see it four days after he was assassinated in November 1995. Shimon Peres, who briefly took over from Rabin, rejected it. Barak's public offer on Jerusalem was a gesture of statesmanlike proportions for an Israeli leader but it was not matched by PLO leader Yasser Arafat in either word or deed. Instead, Arafat embarked on a long round of consultations with his sponsors and allies. While he was on his shuttle, Ariel Sharon triggered the second major Palestinian *intifada* by defiantly marching onto the Muslim holy site, the Harem as-Sharif in the Old City of Jerusalem which contains the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa mosque.

Since then the conflict has grown ever more vicious. Both current Israeli Prime Minister Sharon and Arafat appear to have vested interests in the conflict continuing. Sharon promotes a belligerent Israeli agenda and Arafat maintains a studied ambiguity between not wanting - and not being able to - halt the Palestinian uprising which has acquired a momentum of its own. Both sides consistently blame each other for the conflict. Neither appear to have any coherent plan to return to peace negotiations.

What is lacking is trust and the kind of leadership which is able to rise above the conflict and seek historic compromises which would stop short of victory for either side. But despite nearly a year of conflict, there have been some advances at the level of international diplomacy. The Mitchell Commission, which included EU representatives, broke the exclusive iron grip of the US on the Middle East and has since led to a consensus at the G8 meeting in Genoa in July regarding the need for international observers as part of a solution to the current crisis. The US has also condemned Israel for some of its military excesses although it has continued to veto UN resolutions proposing an international peacekeeping force.

The current institutional peace efforts - the Mitchell Commission and the Egyptian-Jordanian initiative which bolsters the Sharm-El-Sheikh agreement - have as their key elements: a ceasefire (which has failed), the immediate cessation of Israeli settlement activity in areas of the Palestinian authority (which is being systematically defied) and the return to negotiations over final status issues (when the interim agreement has been totally violated by Israel). Clearly, this does not bode well for peace in the short to medium term.

## Regional Context

What works against the Palestinian cause, apart from the vastly superior Israeli information machine, is an Arab world which is not able to boast a single democracy and not even much progress towards democracy in those states which have benevolently authoritarian governments with some elements of democracy, such as Jordan. The Arab countries have used the Palestinian cause when it has suited them but repeatedly put it on the backburner in the hopes of securing US aid and investment. They have made significant financial contributions toward the coffers of the PLO over the years but when Arafat came out on the side of Iraq=s Saddam Hussein in the 1991 Gulf war, most Arab sponsors abandoned him and he had to turn to the Western donors for funds under the umbrella of an Israeli-Palestinian land-for-peace deal.

While Israel has succeeded in negotiating peace accords with Egypt (1979), the Palestinians (1993) and Jordan (1994), the Palestinians have little to show for peace. Israel has used the accords to render the Arab and international boycott of Israel ineffective - particularly in south-east Asia, the former eastern Europe and Latin America - while Palestinians have had to endure increasing economic and social hardship under arbitrary closures of Gaza and strict influx control in Jerusalem. Syria, which insists on a total return to the pre-1967 boundaries of the Golan Heights, and Lebanon, which has embraced the militant Hizbollah group as part of its own, remain hostile while Iraq and Iran are sworn foes preaching Israel=s destruction. The withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon in early 2000 marked a turning-point in the Arab-Israeli conflict and fuelled Palestinian morale, paving the way for the outbreak of the *intifada* later in September following the collapse of the Camp David II talks. The image of Israeli troops making a hasty withdrawal in the face of triumph by the fighters of the Hizbollah was probably the biggest morale boost to the Palestinian cause since Israel was caught napping by the Yom Kippur war in 1973.

Saudi Arabia maintains an ambiguous position but is instrumental in funding, through a network of Islamic charities, Israel=s most militant Palestinian foes - the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas). Egypt, once Israel=s closest Arab ally, has become one of the Sharon government=s most virulent critics and President Hosni Mubarak has declared that there can be no progress towards peace as long as Sharon is in power.

### South Africa: A Peace Broker

During the past seven years, South Africa has skilfully positioned itself as a key player in the Middle East by

unravelling the strong Israeli-bias of the apartheid years *in favour of a more even-handed approach to the Middle East* which has involved the establishment of relations with all the countries of the Arab world. South Africa remains the only country to recognise the state of Palestine after the 1993 peace accords (Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) countries had already done so) and has progressively stepped up its public condemnation of Israeli human rights violations.

During the NAM summit on Palestine held in Pretoria in May this year, South Africa - through the groundwork of Nelson Mandela and leadership of President Thabo Mbeki - were clearly able to signal to the Arafat camp that the honeymoon was over and that it was now time for the PLO to deliver in terms of halting the violence and resuming negotiations. But the belligerent response of the Israelis - and the momentum of violence on the ground - made it difficult for Arafat to move back to the negotiating table even if he wanted to. *The NAM resolution dovetailed with UN insistence on measures to protect the Palestinians from further human rights violations through the creation of a UN peacekeeping force.* Although this proposal has been vetoed by the US, the recent G8 meeting in Genoa indicated that the US is moving towards a consensus on some form of international involvement.

As the Palestinian intellectual Edward Said has indicated, what is required to change the atmosphere in the Middle East is a recognition from Israel of the historical injustices perpetrated against the Palestinians in the name of the creation and maintenance of an exclusively Jewish state. *South Africa, which has a potentially unique influence on both sides due to Mandela=s moral authority and the example set by South Africa=s own transition to democracy, should play a more active role in delivering the Palestinian side for peace by persuading them to resume peace negotiations and continually pointing out to them the South African example of historic generosity by the oppressed.* The frameworks for peace are there (Mitchell Report, Egyptian-Jordanian agreement, Sharm El-Sheikh, the Beilin-Abu Mazen plan, the Clinton plan and the various agreements of the Oslo peace accord) when they are needed. The focus now must be firstly on creating the conditions for a change of Israeli leadership while responding to Israel=s international propaganda war. The Palestinians and their allies in the Arab and developing worlds owe it to the Palestinian cause to win the hearts and minds of the industrialized countries and their own populations.

South Africa can play a key role. That means engaging in something that the SA government tends to avoid because of the historical sensitivities between Muslim and Jew in South Africa: *a gradual engagement about the real issues in the Middle East rather than interaction between their prejudices and bigotry.* There are signs that the reality of South Africa=s transition to democracy has already rubbed off

to some extent on both communities. Now it is time to go the whole way and for the two communities to engage each other at every level. The South African experience best addresses Israeli fears and could be a major confidence-building factor. *South African civil society should engage, wherever possible, with both their Israeli and Palestinian counterparts.* When the moment arrives South Africa has the potential to be the most effective honest broker in the Middle East.

## Conclusion

The only international factors that could shift the balance-of-terror towards an equation more conducive to peace would be increased pressure on both Israel and the Palestinian leadership to return to the Beilin-Abu Mazen plan of 1995 and the Clinton plan of December, 2000. Given that the Oslo accord is in tatters, there is growing support for a return to the Madrid process of 1991 which included Syria (and Lebanon) - along with Egypt and Jordan among the negotiating parties. Sponsorship of peace should be broadened - previously confined to the United States and Russia - to include the EU foreign minister Xavier Solana, the German foreign minister Joschka Fischer, the UN secretary-general Kofi Annan and South Africa's own President Thabo Mbeki. Britain's Tony Blair and France's Lionel Jospin could be expected to play key roles among the EU countries. With former President Mandela's groundwork and the example of South Africa's own transition, South Africa is the one party acceptable to the Palestinians which is also a country that Israel - or at least the Israeli peace camp - could accept.

Helping this process would be solid US backing for international observers and, ultimately, international peacekeepers and the negotiation of a permanent international presence in Jerusalem. Time could throw up a new leadership - in both Israel and Palestine - which would be able to rise above the seemingly irreconcilable conflict. The challenge then would be to negotiate a historic compromise which would recognise both the right of Israel to exist as a secure state as well as create the necessary trust for the establishment of a viable Palestinian state. Beilin, who was justice minister in the labour government of Ehud Barak, is a leader with an impressive track record in adhering to the principles of peace and consistent commitment to a negotiated settlement. He also has a long track record as Israel's most influential anti-apartheid activist and was instrumental in the Israeli government endorsing a package of US-style sanctions against South Africa in 1987. Beilin, who was one of the initiators of the Oslo accords, was wise enough to remain outside the Sharon coalition government thus preserving his integrity and credibility.

Who will succeed Arafat is a far more complex question but it will certainly mark the end of an era and open up new possibilities for building new relationships and negotiating a more viable peace than the current generation have been able to do. The best that can be hoped for under the current leadership is a ceasefire, which so far the Palestinian leader has been unwilling or unable to deliver, and further transfers of land by Israel to the Palestinian autonomy. In the meantime, South Africa should be cultivating leaders of vision and integrity such as Beilin so that Pretoria will be well-placed to play a key mediating role when the time is ripe.

## Suggested Reading

- 1 Rema Hammami and Salim Tamari, *The Second Uprising: End or New Beginning?* *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol XXX, no 2, winter 2001.
- 2 Amal Jamal, *The Palestinians in the Israeli Peace Discourse: A Conditional Partnership.* *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol XXX, no 2, winter 2001.
- 3 Sara Roy, *Palestinian Society and Economy: The Continued Denial of Possibility.* *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol XXX, no 4, Summer 2001.
4. <http://www.ipsjps.org/jps>

**\*John Battersby is editor of the Sunday Independent. From 1994-96 he served as the Middle East correspondent of the Christian Science Monitor.**

This article was written before the terror attacks in New York and Washington on September 11. The analysis stands and no changes or edits were made following the attack.