

# THE HOLY LAND: CAN PEACE BE RESCUED?



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THE U.S. COULD, IF IT WISHED, BREAK THE IMPASSE AND HELP ISRAELIS AND PALESTINIANS MAKE PEACE. SO SAYS A VETERAN FSO AND MIDDLE EAST HAND.

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*BY PHILIP C. WILCOX JR.*

he Israeli-Palestinian struggle over the Holy Land, which has attracted more obsessive attention and defied a solution longer than any major conflict of the past century, is the story of two victims. The Jews were the victim of historic Christian anti-Semitism that brought forth Zionism, the quest for a state for the Jews in their ancient homeland. The Nazi era and the Holocaust made the Zionist cause even more urgent, and led to the 1948 war and the birth of Israel. The Palestinians, many of whom were dispossessed and fled the war, were the other victim.

It is not surprising that neither the Jews, given their past suffering and desperation after Hitler's war, nor the Palestinians, who had no responsibility for Jewish suffering at the hands of Westerners, but nevertheless lost their homeland, felt any empathy for each other. It is tragic, nevertheless, that the passage of time has done so little to heal these historic wounds and that the rest of the world, especially the United States, has allowed this dreadful situation to fester. And it is ironic that today the prospects for peace are still distant, even as the outline of a two-state solution, the only way to meet the core needs of both societies, has become clear.

There are many reasons for this failure: unrelenting propaganda; dysfunctional Israeli and Palestinian politics; the huge disparity of power between them; and America's failure to serve as an even-handed peacemaker.

### **The Power of Propaganda**

Pervasive, self-righteous propaganda and incitement — deeply embedded in the political culture of both sides — have prolonged the conflict. Each has demonized the other to justify violence and cruelty. Politicians promote fear, not reconciliation, and find obstacles to negotiations because they oppose compromise. Negative mirror images between Israelis and Palestinians and, especially, terrible mutual violence have devastated hopes for peace in both societies.

In recent years, Israeli historians, using newly opened archives, have debunked some well-worn totems of Israel's idealized national narrative. They have established, for example, that 750,000 Palestinians were driven out by Israeli forces in the 1948 war, or fled in fear of their lives, and that their "voluntary" departure in response to Arab radio broadcasts is a myth. And they have established that ideology and territorial expansion, rather than peace, have sometimes motivated Israel's policy. More recently, Israeli and other analysts have challenged the notion that Yasser Arafat wrecked the Oslo peace process by rejecting a "gener-

ous offer" at Camp David in 2000 in favor of armed struggle. Nevertheless, Israel's patriotic myths are deeply entrenched and constantly recycled.

Israel's political culture exalts military power and deterrence as the key to security, and devalues negotiations and compromise. The Israel Defense Forces is the country's most powerful institution in shaping public opinion and national security policy. The IDF's iconic status and the country's overblown faith in force are understandable, given the Jews' historic powerlessness, the Holocaust and seven wars in the last 58 years. But pervasive propaganda has also reinforced a sense of permanent siege, notwithstanding Israel's military pre-eminence and nuclear monopoly in the region.

Israelis' self-righteous narrative of exclusive victimization and exaggerated belief in force have made it more difficult to deal realistically with their Palestinian neighbors. The occupation and settlement of territories conquered in 1967 has produced deep intellectual and moral confusion over the character of Zionism and the Israeli state. Propaganda has obscured the injustice of settlements in the territories and continued denial of genuine Palestinian self-determination. "Security" is cited to justify violations of international law and basic Jewish values, and to protect Israel's self-image as a humane, democratic country.

Historically, unrelieved occupation of an unwilling people has always bred violent rebellion. Yet many Israelis do not grasp the link between terrorism and military occupation, settlements and denial of human rights. Politicians and the media still preach that Palestinian violence stems from hatred of the Jews and rejection of Israel, even after most Palestinians and the Arab states have abandoned rejection of Israel in favor of a two-state peace.

Palestinians are also deeply self-absorbed with their victimization and, like the Israelis, they too easily surrender to pathologies of martyrdom and revenge. Their political culture seldom accepts responsibility for dysfunctional organization, internal fragmentation and other historic failures, and tends to blame everything on Israel. Some Palestinians, like President Mahmoud Abbas, condemn terrorism and recognize its brutalizing effect. Yet many young Palestinians still cling to the fantasy that Israel will ultimately yield to violence. Too few understand the devastating effect of terrorism in feeding negative Israeli and worldwide stereotypes of

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Palestinians and diverting attention from the justice of their cause.

### **Two Divided Societies**

Another reason for the stalemate is the fact that radical minorities on both sides wield disproportionate power that blocks effective majorities and cripples peacemaking. In Israel, the influence of extremist and religious factions is inflated by a parliamentary system that allows the election of members from many small parties, including ultra-orthodox Jews and messianic Religious Zionists who support settlements. The results are unstable coalitions or “national unity” governments like Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s current Kadima-led coalition. Held hostage by minorities, governments have been unable to act decisively on issues of territory and peace, and the few that have attempted it have collapsed.

Most of Israel’s impressive intellectual and cultural elite understand the corrosive effects of occupation. They support a wide variety of human rights and peace groups, and produce the most trenchant and authoritative criticism of Israeli policy. Moreover, repeated polls suggest that a majority of Israelis, on the conceptual level, want peace, oppose settlements and support a negotiated two-state solution in return for real peace.

Paradoxically, however, at election time Israelis’ support for peace is often trumped by security fears. For the majority, the lesson of the failed Oslo process, the 2000-2004 intifada and the recent Lebanon war, constantly reinforced by politicians and generals, is that Israel can only rely on force, since “there is no Palestinian partner.” Thus far, the peace camp has been unable to persuade electoral majorities that negotiations and peace are a realistic alternative.

Palestinian politics are also deeply divided and dysfunctional. The main fault line lies between Fatah and Hamas, but there are many smaller secular and Islamist factions. As in other subject societies and emerging polities, Palestinian institutions are weak, for lack of experience and opportunity. Except for a few years during the Oslo era, Israeli policy has worked against Palestinian self-government and democracy. Arafat’s authoritarian style and lack of coherent strategy also took a toll.

Israel’s policy today of maintaining its occupation of the

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West Bank and opposing the newly elected Hamas government, bodes ill for Palestinian institutional development. The IDF has taken charge, de facto, of security in the West Bank, and Palestinian civil government hardly functions. Onerous controls over internal movement and the separation barrier block trade. And the cutoff of Western aid and Israel’s withholding of tax revenues owed to Palestinians in order to undermine Hamas have accelerated poverty and

institutional breakdown.

In this environment, armed factions have filled the vacuum. Fractious and disorderly, the Palestinian political system is ill-equipped to make major decisions about peace with Israel and to win public support for hard choices. President Abbas and Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh have called for a national unity government of technocrats with a nonpartisan prime minister, hoping to restore aid and restart negotiations. But as of this writing, this has not been implemented, Hamas/Fatah violence continues, and Israel and the U.S. have offered little encouragement.

### **“Peace Process” Versus Peace**

Since 1991, the American concept of peacemaking has been a process of dialogue, negotiations and “confidence building.” Washington has served as a go-between, but has seldom offered clear American policy views on the big issues of settlements, borders, Jerusalem and refugees. The exception was the “Clinton parameters” offered in December 2000 to rescue the dying Oslo process after the collapse of the Camp David Summit in July. Both sides accepted these, although with reservations, and Israeli and Palestinian negotiators fleshed them out at Taba in January 2001. But this tentative agreement was soon mooted by the election of Ariel Sharon, a proponent of force, and the inauguration of George W. Bush.

The 1993 Oslo Declaration was little more than promises for mutual recognition, an end to violence, and negotiations over six years. Its failure confirmed that a process without strong third-party mediation and an agreed definition of peace cannot work. The Oslo process contained no such agreement and the two sides had very different expectations. Israel assumed it could keep most

settlements and all of Jerusalem, and that the Palestinians would accept a shrunken quasi-state. But the Palestinians expected evacuation of all settlements, full sovereignty within the 1949 armistice line and a capital in East Jerusalem. The Oslo process also failed because of deep political divisions on both sides that deprived Arafat and Rabin — and later Peres and Barak — of strong negotiating mandates.

The lack of an agreed destination and internal disunity helped extremists on both sides wreck the process. Israel aggressively expanded settlements; suicide bombings by radical Islamists violated the Palestinians' promise to halt violence; and the IDF imposed repressive new policies in the name of security. The result was a devastating loss of mutual confidence in peace.

It was naïve to expect that Israelis and Palestinians could make peace by themselves, given the huge disparity of power between them, without strong, even-handed U.S. mediation. Yet the U.S. withheld vigorous mediation and policy proposals of its own until December 2000, when Clinton offered his "parameters." But it was too late. Nor was the U.S. an honest broker. As Aaron Miller, the deputy U.S. negotiator, acknowledged in 2005: "Far too often, we functioned ... as Israel's lawyer."

### **America's Failure**

Why has America, notwithstanding its great power, been unable to summon the diplomatic leadership and even-handedness needed to help resolve this conflict? For years, it has been widely believed, although seldom discussed in public, that an "Israel lobby" has discouraged U.S. policies that could make peace and protect American interests. The now-famous essay on this lobby in the March 2006 issue of the *London Review of Books* by Professors John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt — who, quoting *Salon*, describe it as the "elephant in the living room" — has provoked shrill criticism, including charges of anti-Semitism. But it has also opened up useful public debate.

It is no secret to U.S. officials, legislators and the media that well-funded, dedicated groups like the American Israel Public Affairs Committee have often succeeded in discouraging official or media criticism of Israel and the adoption of U.S. policies at odds with Israel's. These groups often do so by conflating criticism of Israeli policy with hostility to Israel and Zionism, stifling debate and strengthening the conviction that any criticism of Israeli

policy is politically dangerous, if not suicidal.

The passionate efforts of some American Jewish groups to protect Israel from criticism reflect genuine fears, based on Jewish history, that even well-meaning criticism, if it becomes widespread, might bring latent anti-Semitism out of the woodwork and weaken American support that Israel needs. Mention of the lobby also evokes memories of old anti-Semitic canards about "Jewish power." Others fervently reject any criticism of Israeli policy because it threatens their belief system that idealizes Israel as something exceptional and above criticism.

But the Israel lobby is hardly the only reason for America's lopsided alliance with Israel. Many Americans feel a strong affinity for Israel because of the Bible, the "Judeo-Christian" cultural tradition and remorse over the Holocaust. There is also a powerful fundamentalist Christian lobby that views Israel as the prophetic vehicle for the second coming of Christ. These forces are strong, especially in the absence of historic American connections with, and much suspicion and ignorance toward, Arabs and Muslims.

Some conservatives argue that Israel is a strategic military ally, although the case for this was never strong and faded after the Cold War. Also, some Americans reject the view that terrorism against Israel is a response, ugly but predictable, to the prolonged denial of Palestinian self-determination, and believe America must stand uncritically with Israel in a "war on terrorism."

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the United States, if it wished, *could* break the current impasse and help Israelis and Palestinians make peace, notwithstanding the obstacles that have crippled policy in the past. The substance of a comprehensive peace plan is already clear. In over 20 years of unofficial and official negotiations before 2001, Israeli and Palestinian experts found mutually acceptable answers to almost all final-status issues. (There is less consensus on Jerusalem and refugees, though solutions for these issues are not beyond reach.)

The essence of an overall solution is found in the still-born Clinton parameters of late 2000, the Taba talks of January 2001 and the citizen-led Geneva Accords of 2003. In short, a workable plan would include an end to most settlements, with some border changes and land swaps, two capitals in Jerusalem, security and economic arrangements, and a resolution of the Palestinian refugee issue (albeit one that is mostly symbolic).

Moreover, repeated polls suggest that majorities on

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both sides would support a comprehensive plan for peace if they had reason to hope peace were possible. The problem is that the same majorities have lost all hope, and neither Israeli nor Palestinian leaders have embraced such a plan. The current Israeli leadership, driven by the military and settler interests, seeks a radically different outcome with a unilaterally imposed, ersatz Palestinian state, confined by barriers in scarcely connected enclaves. Palestinian policies have been ambiguous, and the new Hamas government seems to have no clear policy except sticking fast to non-recognition of Israel and the right to armed resistance, although it continues to support a ceasefire and has authorized President Abbas to negotiate.


### **The Path to Peace**

A U.S. peace initiative, with a firm commitment by the president, that sponsored new negotiations based on solutions already proposed by Israelis and Palestinians could have a dramatic effect on the politics and psychology of both sides if skillfully designed, presented with compassion for both, and pursued firmly and patiently. To be

sure, such a plan would be bitterly opposed at the outset by right-wing Israeli leaders and by influential conservative Jewish and Christian elements here at home. It would therefore require stamina, an extended horizon for success, and a skilled effort to build a strong American and international peace constituency.

To succeed, an American peace plan should propose solutions not only for the core Israeli-Palestinian issue, but for Israel's conflicts with Syria and Lebanon as well. Israel's recent disastrous war with Lebanon has underscored the indivisibility of these three conflicts. Such a bold American initiative could ease our disengagement from Iraq and encourage support from the Arab world for that process. A comprehensive approach could also help neutralize the challenge from Iran and establish a more rational U.S.-Iranian relationship.

To create a domestic foundation for a new Middle East policy, the president should engage and seek to empower, especially, liberal Zionist groups and unaffiliated Jews who support peace and may well constitute, contrary to conventional wisdom, a "silent" American Jewish majority.




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No U.S. president has ever tried this, mistakenly assuming that groups like AIPAC speak for most American Jews. Such a strategy would also reach out to peaceminded Israeli political groups and leaders, whom Washington has ignored in recent years.

Success for a new American initiative would also require strong international support, especially from the Arab world, and endorsement by the U.N. The plan might incorporate parts of President Bush's Middle East Road Map, as a preliminary phase to precede talks to implement the plan's larger vision for a final-status peace. The 2002 Arab League offer to make peace with Israel in return for liberation of the Palestinians should also be built in, and a distinguished, full-time envoy would be needed.

The underlying strategy would be to mobilize support, over time, from the majority of Israelis and Palestinians by offering renewed hope with a bold plan that meets both peoples' most fundamental needs. It would rest on expectations that Israelis and Palestinians, who are deeply weary of conflict, would ultimately support such a plan in their self-interest, and would, if necessary, oblige their leaders to do likewise or give way to others.

The American message would reflect the compelling but little-understood reality that such a comprehensive plan would be pro-Israel and pro-Palestine, since the fundamental interests of both sides — Israelis' need for peace and security in a democratic, Jewish state, and Palestinians' demand for freedom and justice in a state of their own — are absolutely interdependent. Majorities on both sides understand this equation, but have lost hope it can be achieved. With convincing American leadership, both could embrace it.

### **The Stakes Are High**

Conventional political wisdom today holds that the situation is not "ripe" for a bold U.S. initiative; it would collapse amidst a fire storm of opposition, embarrassing the U.S. and creating deeper cynicism about peace. In fact, this conflict is never "ripe" for a solution. It becomes worse as time passes, and efforts to manage it by working on its margins have always failed. Moreover, the gravity of the situation calls for an audacious change in policy. Even if the U.S. did not succeed after persistent efforts, it would win stature and respect for a wise and courageous new policy.

Israel, 58 years after its founding, is still struggling to

define itself and Zionism. The choices seem clear. Will Israel abandon the ill-fated adventure with occupation and settlement begun after 1967 to become a state at peace with its neighbors and the world? Or will it be a besieged, garrison state, in strategic retreat notwithstanding its nuclear weapons, burdened by a chronic, violent rebellion, and beset with a new anti-Semitism, especially in the Arab and Muslim worlds, that confuses Judaism with Israeli policy? Will Israel sacrifice its goal of becoming a peaceful state, based on universal and Jewish values, for an impossible project of defeating and colonizing its Palestinian neighbors, who in a matter of decades will outnumber Israeli Jews?

Israel has been unable to make this choice, and the settler movement — the nation's most united, dynamic political group — although a minority, continues to prevail by default. The U.S., which proclaims its eternal support for Israel's security and well-being, should help Israel escape from this trap, instead of indulging it in self-destructive policies. That is what friends are for.

Likewise, if America is serious about democracy, human rights and its own principles of justice and freedom, it must also help rescue the Palestinians. Like the Jews, they, too, are victims and deserve freedom and dignity in a state of their own.

Time is short. Some analysts say that the settlements — "facts on the ground" — have already created an irreversible Arab-Jewish entity and advocate a single secular, democratic state. But the one-state formula would likely bring further decades of communal conflict, not peace. Zionism is based on deep historical forces, and the Jewish people will not abandon it. Nor do most Palestinians wish to forgo the dream of a state of their own and face further decades of strife and misery, although today some, in despair, are reverting to the one-state concept.

Most important, the U.S. owes its own citizens a new policy to resolve a conflict that endangers American national security. The continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian struggle and the well-grounded perception that Washington defers to Israeli policy have done more than anything else to inflame anti-American hostility among Arabs and Muslims. At a time when regaining the confidence and respect of people in those volatile regions that now breed terrorism is critical, and when nuclear proliferation poses another ominous threat, resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should be an urgent strategic priority for the U.S. ■