

# CONDEMNED TO ENDLESS STRUGGLE? THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

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THE UNITED STATES CANNOT IMPOSE PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST.  
BUT WITHOUT ITS EFFORTS, A LASTING SOLUTION WILL REMAIN ELUSIVE.

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BY RAFAEL REUVENY

**I**n 1905, Naguib Azoury, a Maronite Ottoman bureaucrat turned Arab nationalist, proclaimed that “Two important phenomena, of the same nature but opposed ... are emerging at this moment in Asiatic Turkey. They are the awakening of the Arab nation and the latent effort of the Jews to reconstitute on a very large scale the ancient kingdom of Israel. ... [They] are *destined to fight* each other continually until one of them wins” [emphasis added].

By the 1920s, Jews and Palestinians had already laid competing claims to Palestine, and their interaction had turned violent. Israel’s June 1967 victory in the Six-Day War and occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip seemed to suggest a permanent end to the conflict, but that turned out to be an illusion. Since 1967, there have been numerous attempts to resolve the conflict diplomatically, but they have all failed. Even the 1993 Oslo accord and subsequent negotiations only temporarily halted the fighting.

So, a century after Azoury penned his grim prediction, has history vindicated him? Can we glean insights from the apparent inability of diplomacy since 1967 to resolve the conflict? If that failure reflects idiosyncratic factors, we would have to conclude that there is nothing to learn from history. However, if the failures reflect a specific problem, one can presumably address it and move forward to a solution of the underlying conflict.

To apply this logic requires examining the diplomatic attempts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since 1967, and identifying the positions of the primary actors involved:

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Israel, the Palestine Liberation Organization/Palestinian Authority, and the international actor sponsoring almost all of these attempts, the United States. All these initiatives have focused on the future of the West Bank and Gaza Strip (hereinafter referred to as “The Territories”), which Israel occupied in 1967.

The list is long: United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 (1967), the [Secretary of State William] Rogers Plan (1969), President Carter’s Geneva Plan (1978) and Camp David Summit (1978), the Saudi Plan (1981), the Reagan Plan (1982), the London Agreement (1987), the PLO Overture (1988), [Secretaries of State] George Shultz’s and James Baker’s plans (1988 and 1989, respectively), Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir’s plan (1989), the Oslo Process (1992-2001), and President Clinton’s Camp David Summit (July 2000) and Peace Plan (December 2000). There have also been numerous attempts since 2001, including the Mitchell Report, the Tenet and Zinni Plans, the Geneva Initiative, President Bush’s Roadmap for Peace, and the Saudi/Arab League Plan.

The patterns revealed by the reactions of our actors to these attempts are discussed next, following which we return to our key question: Why have all these diplomatic attempts failed to resolve the conflict?

## The Israeli Balance Sheet

The Israeli policy approach to The Territories has depended upon the identity of the party leading the government — Labor or Likud — and upon whether the government was formed before or after the start of the Oslo Process (1992).

Before Oslo, the Likud governments sought to annex The Territories in their entirety. The Labor governments sought to annex some of the land and surrender the rest to Jordan in

return for peace. Because of these fundamentally divergent philosophies, the Labor-Likud coalition governments between 1984 and 1990 engaged in frequent disputes over the fate of The Territories.

During the Oslo years, the Likud government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu surrendered a small part of The Territories to the PA, while the Labor governments of Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres and Ehud Barak ceded larger sections.

All Israeli governments built settlements in The Territories during the pre-Oslo period, but pursued different strategies. The Labor governments focused on areas far from Palestinian population centers, while the Likud governments scattered settlements over the entirety of The Territories.

During the Oslo process, both the Labor and Likud governments brought more settlers to The Territories, more than doubling their number during this period. The Rabin government considered the possibility of discussing the future of The Territories and evacuating settlements before the final-status treaty, but decided against it. The Netanyahu government pledged to keep the settlements in place in any final-status setup. The Barak government appeared ready to evacuate many settlements as part of a comprehensive agreement, but bowing to settler demands and right-wing pressure it, too, expanded the Israeli presence in The Territories.

Since the collapse of the Oslo process, Israel has essentially rejected all the conflict-resolution plans that have required it to freeze settlement expansion or return to the 1967 line. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's government rejected Pres. Clinton's proposal, which would have required Israel to remove settlements from almost all of The Territories. Sharon first sought to sign a long-term interim treaty with the Palestinians, but in 2003 began shifting to a plan, dubbed "disengagement," allowing Israel to craft the elements of a gradual pullout from The Territories to a line of its own choosing. Toward that end, the Sharon government evacuated the Gaza Strip in August 2005.

Sharon's successor, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, pledged in early 2006 to evacuate most of the West Bank, dubbing it "convergence," but the plan has all but disappeared. In the meantime, Israel has expanded settlements, and settlers built unauthorized outposts, reportedly assisted by branches of the government. These activities have been going on for years.

### **The Palestinian Balance Sheet**

Unlike the fluctuating Israeli position, the Palestinian stance has evolved in a linear fashion. Until the 1970s, the PLO sought to drive the Jews from Palestine, but in the early 1970s, it began calling for a binational, Israeli-Palestinian state in all of Palestine. Later in that decade, the PLO seemed ready to recognize Israel, in return for recognition of the

Palestinians' right to a state. In 1977, the PLO essentially accepted President Carter's Geneva Plan and United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, amended to mention Palestinian statehood.

By the 1980s, facing growing indication that the U.S. and many in Israel, particularly within Labor, were seeking to solve the conflict by linking a Palestinian entity in The Territories to Jordan, the PLO leaned toward forming a confederation with Amman. However, Likud and its partners rejected that approach, the so-called Jordanian Option, torpedoing the Reagan Plan and its derivatives, the Hussein-Arafat Accord and the London Agreement, negotiated by Israeli Foreign Minister Peres and Jordan's King Hussein.

By the late 1980s, the PLO came to accept putting an end to the conflict based on an Israeli return to the 1967 line and the formation of a Palestinian state in The Territories beside Israel — either in a confederation with Jordan, as mentioned above, or as a standalone entity, as called for by the Saudi Plan of 1981. Affirming this change of stance in 1988 the PLO recognized Israel and declared its intention to resolve the conflict in a peaceful manner. Since then, the Palestinians have essentially accepted all the plans put forward to resolve the conflict, except Israeli Prime Minister Shamir's Plan (1989), which did not recognize the PLO and insisted on continued Israeli control of The Territories.

In 1989, the PLO accepted the Baker Plan, and in 1991 it sent representatives to the Madrid conference. The Palestinians then embarked on the Oslo process with Israel. Within this framework, the PLO/PA signed five major interim treaties with Israel — the Oslo I and Oslo II Accords, the Hebron Protocol, and the Wye River and Sharm El Sheikh Memorandums — assuming this would lead to evacuation of the settlements and formation of a Palestinian state in all of The Territories. However, Israel refused even to discuss these issues before the final-status talks and, instead, expanded the settlements. Soon Palestinian self-rule in the areas surrendered by Israel essentially turned into governance subject to Israeli consent.

By the 1990s, Palestinian dissatisfaction mounted and conflict intensified, sparking frequent Israeli collective punishments, which only inflamed the situation. Still, the PA continued to accept the Oslo outline, despite growing indications that Israel did not intend to fully relinquish The Territories.

With the failure of the Camp David Summit in July 2000, tensions mounted in The Territories and eventually exploded on Sept. 28, 2000, leading to a Palestinian revolt against Israel. Nevertheless, the PA continued talks with Israel, and progress was made by early 2001; but most Israelis rejected this process, electing Ariel Sharon as prime minister.

The PA has accepted the attempts to stop the fighting based on a bilateral, Israeli-Palestinian effort, including the

Jordanian-Egyptian Plan, the Mitchell Report, the Tenet and Zinni Plans, the Saudi-Arab League Peace Plan, the U.S. Roadmap, and the 2003 Geneva Initiative. But it has rejected the fence Israel has been building around the West Bank, and the Israeli disengagement and convergence initiatives, all of which essentially seek to set the Israeli-Palestinian border unilaterally.

### **The U.S. Balance Sheet**

In general, Washington has adopted Israel's position on all the conflict-resolution plans since 1967. When the two allies do disagree on some details, Washington does not force Israel to change its position — particularly not on the substantive matters driving the conflict: territorial control, settlements and the division of Jerusalem.

The U.S. essentially accepts Israel's view of Resolution 242, which Israel argues calls for withdrawal from some of The Territories it occupied in 1967, but not from all of them. When Israel continued its refusal to negotiate with the Palestinians even after the PLO's unilateral recognition of the Jewish state in 1988, the U.S. did not encourage further discussion, and its dialogue with the PLO diminished. Instead, the George H.W. Bush administration supported Israeli Prime Minister Shamir's 1989 plan, effectively a declaration of intent to annex The Territories. And at the 1993 Madrid talks, the U.S. presented a draft of a declaration of principles that, in effect, called for Palestinian personal autonomy for the transition period, not the territorial autonomy that the Palestinians had demanded from the beginning.

When Israel refused to discuss the issues of statehood, borders, Jerusalem, settlements and refugees before the final-status talks of the Oslo process, the U.S. followed suit again, ignoring the spread of Israeli settlements and the expansion of Greater Jerusalem's boundaries. Whereas for

Pres. Carter the settlements were illegal, and for Pres. Reagan and George H.W. Bush they were obstacles to peace, for Pres. Clinton they were merely complicating factors. Beginning in 1967, the U.S. stance was that The Territories were occupied. In the 1990s the U.S. "adjusted" its stance to viewing The Territories as disputed land, control of which would have to be negotiated.

President George W. Bush essentially ignored the Jordanian-Egyptian plan (2001), the Saudi-Arab League Peace Plan (2002) and the Geneva Plan (2003), all of which Israel rejected. The U.S. also adopted the Israeli interpretation of the Mitchell Report, according to which the violence must first stop completely before any move forward can be made. The U.S.-authored Tenet and Zinni Plans and the Middle East Quartet's Roadmap took a similar approach, as Israel insisted. Meanwhile, Israel has steadily expanded the settlements, a policy the Mitchell Report characterized as extremely destructive to stopping the violence and resolving the conflict. Yet the U.S. essentially stood by and did nothing.

Let me be clear: I do not believe the U.S. is a rubber stamp for Israel, but rather that it consistently adopts Israel's positions. Some American presidents have taken a more neutral stance than others, and some disagreed with Israel. However, the ultimate outcome has thus far been an acceptance of the Israeli position. In effect, the U.S. has adopted Israel's vision of a final status in which it retains control of many settlements and does not return to the June 5, 1967, line.

"In light of new realities on the ground, including already existing population centers," Pres. Bush wrote to Prime Minister Sharon on April 14, 2004, "it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final-status negotiations will be a full and complete return to

the armistice lines of 1949." The border must "reflect these realities."

Taking into consideration the three balance sheets, it is apparent that ever since the Six-Day War, Israel has rejected all attempts at conflict resolution that would require it to return to the 1967 line. The Palestinians initially rejected Israel's right to exist but shifted their position to accept it, and have agreed to end the conflict if the 1967 lines are restored. The U.S. has supported the Israeli position in each of the attempts to resolve the conflict, in effect perpetuating continued dissension between the Israelis and Palestinians.

### **Perpetuating the Conflict**

What drives the U.S. position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? The answer is complicated, involving forces such as the political power of the pro-Israel Christian fundamentalist and Jewish lobbies; the prevailing view among many U.S. policymakers that Israel is a strategic asset to the U.S.; and the perception of a common ideology according to which both countries are melting-pot democracies. But a more crucial question is: *How* has the U.S. perpetuated the conflict?

Since the 1960s, Israel has become dependent on the U.S. economically, diplomatically and militarily. According to the U.S. Agency for International Development, from 1962 to 2005 Israel received about \$150 billion in economic and military assistance (in constant 2005 dollars) from the U.S. Earlier this year, Washington increased the assistance to Israel by \$700 million per year, promising to provide a total of \$30 billion during the next 10 years. These figures put Israel at the top of the list of countries receiving aid from the United States. Without this support, its economy would have suffered greatly.

Furthermore, all this aid has been effectively fungible, allowing Israel to funnel more money into strengthening

its grip on The Territories. Regardless of any U.S. insistence that Israel would not spend its aid on expanding settlements, Washington has essentially financed the Israeli settlement project in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Had the American funds not been available, Israel would have had to cut its expenses in other areas in order to finance the massive settlement building task, causing it great difficulty and quite possibly weakening Israeli popular support for the project. Further demonstrating this point, an American-Israeli memorandum of understanding signed in 2007 reportedly allows Israel to use our assistance as it sees fit, unrelated, for example, to progress in the Israeli-Palestinian arena.

Equally critical, the U.S. has shielded Israel from international pressures at the United Nations and elsewhere, essentially forcing its many allies to look the other way when confronted with Israeli abuses. Since the 1960s, the U.S. has become the country's most important source of weapons, and what arms it does not supply come from Europe. Should Washington ever decide to curtail that supply, its allies will most likely follow its cue. And without that stock of weaponry, many units of the Israeli defense forces, including the celebrated Israeli Air Force, would quickly come to a halt.

It is hard to envision Israel defying the U.S. for any extended period, particularly if Washington backs its words with concrete actions (as Pres. George H.W. Bush did in 1991 by temporarily cutting off aid to protest settlement expansion). But so long as America does not go beyond rhetoric, and continues to provide financial and military aid to Israel, it is essentially supporting Israeli control of The Territories.

We must stress that the point is not that the U.S. cannot compel Israel to take a certain position should it decide to do so. On the contrary, when a U.S.

president decides to impress upon Israel to take specific action, it complies. For example, Pres. Nixon persuaded Israel to accept Resolution 242 — albeit under an Israeli interpretation that requires it to withdraw from some, but not all, of The Territories — and averted the destruction of the Third Egyptian Army in the 1973 war. Later, Nixon and Ford encouraged Israel to withdraw from parts of the Sinai and Syria, and Pres. Carter prevailed upon Israel to withdraw completely from the Sinai region and remove all the settlements there, as well as to accept the idea that the Palestinians are a national group with legitimate political rights.

Pres. Reagan convinced Israel to let the PLO forces retreat from Beirut, and his successor prompted Israel to attend the Madrid Conference. Pres. Clinton compelled Prime Minister Netanyahu, who rejected the Oslo Process, to sign the Hebron Protocol and Wye Memorandum, and persuaded Prime Minister Barak to enhance his offer at Camp David and at the Egyptian resort of Taba. In fact, any other outcome in those cases would have been utterly strange. A country that receives virtually all of its military equipment and approximately \$3 billion a year from another country, which also shields it from international criticisms and sanctions, is not really free to make independent decisions.

### **A Fateful Choice**

In a major speech he gave in November 2001, Secretary of State Colin Powell declared: "History, fate and success have combined to compel American leadership in the Middle East and around the globe. ... We welcome the opportunity to use our power and influence to make the world a better place for all of God's children."

With the possible reconvening of a regional peace conference in late 2007

at the initiative of the current president, it is important to bear in mind the fact that, ultimately, Washington can lead internationally only to the extent that others are willing to follow — unless it resorts to coercion. After all, a broker who consistently sides with one party in a dispute will in all probability fail to convince the opposing party to go along.

Thus, despite the repeated attempts of the U.S., beginning in September 2000, to convince the Palestinians to halt their second revolt against Israeli control, it has never really ended. Instead, in 2006 the Palestinians put in power Hamas, the very party that has all along rejected U.S. brokering. Now that Hamas has taken full control over the Gaza Strip, the already complex situation is nearly intractable.

In the end, one cannot help but wonder whether the situation would have evolved differently had Pres. Clinton suggested his plan in July 2000, instead of December of that year. As written, his proposal called on Israel to withdraw from 94 to 96 percent of The Territories, and to exchange parcels of land with the Palestinians for the proposed land to be annexed to Israel. Unfortunately, both Pres. Clinton and Prime Minister Barak were already on their way out of the political arena, and their successors rejected that approach.

Of course, we will never know the exact answer to this question. But in any case, as long as the U.S. continues to refrain from exerting real pressure on Israel to return to the 1967 line and evacuate the settlements, Azoury's century-old prediction will continue to be correct. That is to say, Israelis and Palestinians are fated to fight until one group is the victor.

The converse is also possible, however: the Israeli-Palestinian violent debacle could be brought to a halt. Ultimately, the choice is in the hands of the United States. ■

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