

# **BUILDING PEACE BETWEEN ISRAEL and PALESTINE THE NEED FOR CULTURAL CHANGE ©**

## **Introduction**

The recent ceasefire between Israel and Hamas ended the fourth outbreak of violence between them. It is no more than a hiatus in a continuing war over identity. Its flashpoints, an attempted eviction by an Israeli trial court of Palestinian families from homes occupied in Sheikh Jarrah, and heavily armed Israeli police who took over the Al Aqsa mosque near the end of 2021 Ramadan services are incidental. Flashpoints do not explain the underlying conflict.

Observers of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict despair of the inability of both sides to make peace. Beginning with the 1991-1993 Madrid talks, and ending with the 2013-2014 talks prompted by then US Secretary of State John Kerry, major powers including the US, EU, UN and Russia have attempted to act as 'honest brokers' to lead both sides to a peace agreement. All of those efforts were in vain. Each was designed around resolution of a long list of contentious issues that are well known.

The existential issue of acceptance of Israel as the historic homeland of the Jewish people was never really on the table. No one bothered to imagine how two very different cultures sharing a tiny piece of land might come to peace given their history. Peace agreements that do not make an effort to deal with and to change cultural perception cannot produce lasting peace.

Israel and the Palestinians have been increasingly at war since the 1880's when larger numbers of European Jews began to emigrate to the holy land as Zionism grew popular. The local Arab population, conditioned by roughly 1400 years of anti-Jewish religious training reacted out of fear. Lacking any social or political structures expressed

their fears, by taking to the streets and rioting. The worst but not the only of these episodes were in Hebron in August 1929 and in Jerusalem between 1936 and 1939. The British sent in the military to put down the rioters.

There is no doubt that some 20,000 Arabs were wounded or killed during the course of the Jerusalem riots. The British Royal Commission known as the Peel Commission reported in 1939. It maps out the facts in painful detail. The quiet interlude following the recent 2021 ceasefire is no more than a temporary hiatus. The status quo remains one of war. What is new and frightening is the risk of civil war between Israeli Jews and Arab Israelis. Arab Israelis have for 73 years supported Israel during conflicts in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem. The riots in Israel between Jewish Israelis and Arab Israelis mark a new and ominous chapter in this conflict. The Middle East is an unstable region. Conflict between Israel's own citizens widens and deepens the existing chasm.

### **Some Basic History**

Israel declared statehood on May 14, 1948 in accordance with UN resolution no 181 passed by the UN General Assembly in November of 1947. Her provisional government immediately set about establishing the institutional structures necessary for success, ranging from building representative institutions, bureaucracy, roads, homes, community medical facilities, and schools.

The areas known as West Bank and Gaza never had representative governments. While Israel moved forward to statehood, Palestine stood back. The Arab response to UN resolution 181 was rejection. And declaring Palestinian statehood would have implied recognition of a Jewish state in the Muslim Middle East. For 1400 years Muslims were taught to believe that Allah (God) cursed the Jews and turned them into "apes and swine". Even more troublesome for the Arab world after the 1948 war

and the three wars that followed in 1956, 1967 and 1973, was the damage to the self-image of the strong and proud Arab at the hands of the Jews. So Palestinians became victims of their own religion and culture and did nothing to advance their own interests. Arab and Palestinian politics have always been rooted in opposition.

Israel quickly developed modern institutions, and in time grew a modern, high-tech economy, and molded an identity uniting a motley mix of Jewish refugees from all over the world many of whom bore little cultural resemblance to one another. Palestine, on the other hand stagnated. Between 1948 and 1994 the Palestinians developed no political institutions of their own.

Jordan controlled what became known as West Bank and East Jerusalem and Egypt controlled Gaza. West Bank during bible times consisted of the Jewish kingdoms of Samaria and Judea.

For cultural reasons, the Arab peoples throughout the Middle East never built secular, representative, political or social institutions. For Arabs, community was the 'Ummah'. It was supra-national and constructed completely around religion. More damaging for Palestinian Arabs in the run up to the 1948 war was their reliance on external Arab leaders known as the *Higher Arab Executive* such as Gamal Nasser of Egypt, Khalid al-Azim of Syria, Khaled al Azm of Iraq, King Hussein of Jordan and Haj Amin al-Husseini, the grand Mufti of Jerusalem.

Husseini met with Adolf Hitler on November 28, 1941 to offer Arab support against the British. He encouraged Hitler to bring the "final solution" [extermination of the Jews] to Jerusalem. The secretary general of the Arab League in 1948 publically assured the Arab peoples that the "occupation of Tel Aviv and Palestine would be as simple as a military promenade". In an essay published in 1976 in the PLO's official

journal, Abu Mazen, better known as Mahmoud Abbas, President of the West Bank blamed those Arabs who fled in order to escape “sharing the burden of struggle.”

Arab leaders and Arab news organizations demonstrated absolute confidence in their capacity to drive out the Jews after which those who fled could return and reclaim their lands. Their most frequent war cry was ‘drive the Jews into the sea’ meaning the Mediterranean. The speeches, writings and interviews of these Arab leaders are part of the historical record.

### **The Problem of History**

History is art. It deals with interpreted facts. By its very nature it has limitations. Its most troublesome limitation is that every historian has his or her own world view and biases. None of us is free of bias. Each of us is a product of our upbringing, education, religious instruction, friendships and social and business interactions. The only issue is whether we honestly recognize our biases and seek balance.

As conflict deepens and remains unresolved the less likely it is that opposing sides will demonstrate any interest in paying attention to any history written by the other side no matter how fair it may be.

One can only imagine how Palestine might have developed had it been able to make a parallel effort in competition with, or better still, in co-operation with post 1948 Israel. That was not meant to be. And as we know history moves in one direction. Lost opportunities can never be recovered. The PLO, the first Palestinian government, was founded in 1964. And its charter mission was Israel's destruction. As that organization floundered, Hamas emerged in 1987 in opposition to the PLO. Despite calls for the PLO after the 1993 Oslo Accords to amend its charter, it has never done so.

Hamas' core mission is identical. There is an interesting double standard in play that attacks Israel's legitimacy. A quick look at the founding dates for the following countries underlines this. Modern Lebanon was established in 1920, Iraq in 1922, Saudi Arabia in 1932, Syria and Jordan in 1946, Libya in 1947, Egypt in 1953, Algeria in 1962. Part of Jordan in biblical times was located in ancient Israel. No one asserts that any of these modern nations are illegitimate.

### **Proceeding Realistically**

The efforts made leading up to and following the 1993 Oslo Accords have not brought peace to Israel or the Palestinians. At an operational level, the procedural weaknesses of its mediation and arbitration processes made resolution unlikely and grievances multiplied. But the real problem with top down, procedurally complex, internationally brokered agreements is simple. Agreements don't work if either or both of the parties do not recognize the other's fundamental right to exist. Israel has never denied the right of Palestinians to a state of their own. They are understandably worried about peaceful co-existence because of terrorism.

For all of the time, effort and taxpayers money spent on the 1993 Oslo Agreement and the 2000 Camp David talks, none of these negotiations ever directly zeroed in on the issue of Palestinian acceptance of Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state in the Middle East. The Oslo Agreement exemplifies reverse engineering. Its authors attempted to build from the roof down to the foundation. Common sense and basic engineering tell us that building from the roof down will not work. That two Nobel peace prizes were awarded to Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat in recognition of the Oslo agreement speaks volumes. Perhaps they were awarded for best efforts.

The foundation for peace making between Israel and the Palestinians is recognition of the other's right to exist. This is an existential issue. In the absence of

such recognition, deal making is premature. The most single impediment to peace between Israel and the Palestinians on any terms is consistent Palestinian refusal to accept Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state in the Muslim Middle East. The UN General Assembly which is often obsessed with Israel released a report in August, 2019 compiled by 18 independent experts criticizing the Palestinian Authority and Hamas for racism, anti-semitism and incitement of violence. In May, 2020 the European Parliament adopted three resolutions condemning the Palestinian authority for continuing to teach hate and violence in its school text books.

The US based Anti-Defamation League which has surveyed anti-semitism annually for five decades has recently reported that 93% of Palestinians hold anti-semitic beliefs. The same 100 country survey also reports that 50% of those surveyed have never heard of the Holocaust.

According to a lengthy 2019 joint poll published by the *Palestine Center for Policy and Survey Research*, 43% of Palestinians and 42% of Israeli Jews support a 'two state solution'. Left wing Israeli support was 91% and right wing support was 23%. While 65% of Palestinians believe a two state solution is viable, 78% of Israeli Jews believe the chances are low or very low. Older Israelis are more confident while younger Israelis are not. The same poll reported that only 18% of Palestinians believed that Jews want peace while 19% of Israeli Jews believe that Palestinians want peace.

These polling numbers tell us what is obvious. There is little trust on both sides and initiatives to build trust must precede negotiation of a two state agreement. The details of an agreement make no difference where there is no trust or willingness to recognize the other's legitimacy. As Israel's political center of gravity shifts to the right, recent surveys show that one half of orthodox Israelis and one quarter of secular Jewish Israelis express open anti-Arab hatred.

Israeli-Palestinian negotiations between 2000 and 2007 highlight the recognition issue. When Israel under US prodding in July, 2000 offered PLO leader Yasser Arafat 92% of the West Bank, 100% of Gaza, compensation for displacement of Palestinian refugees, dismantling of most of the settlements in West Bank and a capital in East Jerusalem. No counter-offer was made. Good faith negotiations always involve offers and counter-offers. Yasser Arafat stormed out of the conference. Reaching agreement would have meant acceptance of a Jewish state in the Middle East. His walking out is unsurprising. It was the spark that set off the second intifada.

In 2008 Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh declared willingness to accept a Jewish state based on the 1967 borders. The same year, another Hamas leader, Mahmoud al-Zahar declared that any talk of accepting the 1967 borders was “just a phase” until Hamas has a chance to regain all the land. The cry of ‘a free Palestine from the river Jordan to the sea’ means all the land, including Israel.

A cursory look at Arab trading history demonstrates that as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC Arabs traded into Egypt, the Middle East, India, and later on, Europe. We have to assume that these negotiations were mutually beneficial. The negotiating paradox in the case of Israel requires her to concede 100%. For 73 years since Israel declared statehood, Palestinian leadership has insisted on return of the 1948 refugees and two generations of their children and grandchildren, some 5,000,000 people.

The Israeli position on the issue of the refugees is well known. Apart from her denial of any such legal right, she asserts that return of three generations would be suicidal. Israelis would be out numbered in their own state. Palestinian insistence on what they must know by now is impossible demonstrates refusal to accept a Jewish state in the Middle East.

## **Redirecting International Palestinian Aid**

The EU signed an Agreement with the Palestinian Authority in 1997 and has invested approximately 20 billion euros in Palestinian aid. These investments according to its own communiques is premised on movement toward a “democratic and accountable Palestinian state”. Thus far, the transition to democracy has not happened. The last elections in West Bank and Gaza were in 2006. The positive news is that in April, 2021 the European Parliament released a new guideline directed at preventing any donations from ending up in the hands of terrorists. The EU is now calling for recovery of any such funds. That the EU, 20 billion euros and many years later, now realizes that its generosity has been misplaced is positive news.

In the same April, 2021 communique, the European Parliament criticized UNRWA, the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees, for funding Palestinian schools that incite hatred. UNRWA’s 2020 budget for Palestinian aid is some 1.4 billion US dollars. UNRWA was established in December 1949. Perhaps joint US and EU financial pressure on the UN will influence policy change.

What this means for those hoping for resolution of this intractable conflict is that the pre-conditions for negotiation do not exist. The status issues that need to be resolved to allow Palestine to declare statehood are well known. Reasonable people can disagree on terms. Reasonable people also understand that no settlement yields 100 per cent to either side. Settlement by definition demands compromise.

Meaningful negotiations can only begin once there is culture change. Making that happen will require a sea change in beliefs and attitudes. Reversing the cultural tide of 1400 years of ant-Jewish Muslim history is no easy task. To get recognition of Israel’s right to exist will require elimination of the current Palestinian leadership. The Palestinians, especially in Gaza, are truly prisoners of their own leaders. To defend



against terrorism, Israel reflexively hems them in causing serious shortages of vital supplies. The more Israel tightens the noose, the more support grows for Hamas. The conflict cycle is vicious and impenetrable in the absence of leadership change.

The best path is for donors like EU, the US and the United Nations to impose unmistakable financial terms that sidelines the PLO, and Hamas making them Irrelevant. Complete irrelevance is something the Palestinians will understand. The Palestinian Authority according to 2021 ceasefire polls has lost legitimacy in West Bank. Hamas is now preferred. Elections scheduled for this year were cancelled.

Some military-intelligence trained analysts advocate a multi-national land and air war to defeat this leadership. This is as horrific as it is unimaginable. The injuries, deaths and destruction of property caused by war would only intensify the conflict cycle. It would also provide the spark for civil disturbances and anti-Jewish violence around the world. This approach is the equivalent of adding oil to a fire.

Redirecting the flow of Palestinian aid to exclude the existing Palestinian leadership is the better policy choice to force leadership change and a political realignment that makes eventual Israeli-Palestinian negotiations possible. Once Palestinians in free and fair elections declare their willingness to work with Israel and accept her right to exist, the possibilities of peace begin to open up.

## **A Path Forward**

The US Biden administration has signaled that reconstruction aid for Gaza will not flow through Hamas or any of its associates. That policy is in tandem with the EU Parliament's recent communique. Israel, which pledged compensation in 2000 during the Camp David talks for Palestinians who fled in 1948, would need to participate. The UAE and Bahrain have recently extended recognition to Israel and are doing business

with her. Morocco has also recently extended recognition. Egypt made peace with Israel in 1979, Jordan in 1994. It is in Egypt's interest to maintain order along her border with Gaza. It similarly in Jordan's interest to maintain order. Sixty five per cent of her population is Palestinian.

The US, EU, UAE, Bahrain and Israel are in a strong financial position to contribute to a *Palestinian Development Fund*. Egypt, Jordan and Morocco may not be able to contribute financially. However, their political participation would send a positive message about the benefits of making peace with Israel. At the end of World War II the Truman administration created the Marshall Plan to reconstruct war torn Europe.

Perhaps the time has come for a Palestinian development fund to assist in stabilizing the Middle East. The very existence of such a fund would message Arab-Israeli co-operation in helping Palestinians acquire a real stake in their own future.

As an adjunct to this, funding would be necessary to pay salaries to a committee of jointly appointed Israeli and Palestinian historians who would be tasked with writing a common history of this conflict leaving no room for political correctness on either side. Funding would also be needed to pay salaries to research assistants to collect and collate historical materials. The goal would be for the participating countries to publish and publicize this joint history internationally. Each of the participating countries would need to mount a massive, lengthy media campaign. The only way to root out and eliminate prejudice is through education. There is no other way. Attempting to make peace while perpetuating ignorance is a counter-productive waste of time and resources.

Using a western style commission structure, the fund would set up a *Truth and Reconciliation* forum to provide a platform for Israelis and Palestinians to share their

experiences. Because both sides have been victims of this culture clash, shared experience of loss may help each side to see each other as human.

Existing stereotypes of Israelis and Palestinians will change by encouraging each side to engage with one another. And as Palestinians replace despair with hope for a better future, the Palestinian Authority and Hamas will be seen to have no positive purpose and be consigned to the dust bin of history. Peace negotiations will then become possible.

## **A Final Note**

The events of May 2021 portend a hellish existence for Israeli Jews and Arabs. The roving bands of Jews and Arabs who attacked one another in Israeli's cities and towns screaming death to Jews and death to Arabs tells us that the 73 year history of Arab Israeli acquiescence in Israeli governance is in jeopardy.

Acquiescence is not acceptance. It more closely resembles an unraveling string that is growing shorter by the day. The 73 year consensus that has seen Arab Israeli cooperation is now fracturing. Before looking at the steps Israel needs to take, it is worth noting that according to current opinion polls, only 7% of Arab Israelis identify as Palestinian. They see themselves either as Israelis or as Arab Israelis. It is not too late for Israel to make peace with her non Jewish citizens.

Israel needs to reach out to its own citizens who are not Jewish. She alone has the power to do this. It makes simple common sense that the citizens of a democracy enjoy the same basic, fundamental rights. Declaring legal equality in theory while denying in practice is bound to fail in the long run. A minority's willingness to be marginalized eventually runs its course. To prefer one community over the other damages both. It hurts Arab Israelis and casts Israel as Goliath and the Arabs as David

while the world watches. Israel does not have many friends to begin with and the ever present plague of anti-Semitism is always ready to be fired up. Decreasing political and financial support for Israel from half of the world's Jews who do not live there is not exactly new.

Imagine how perception of Israel would change if the rules that govern land ownership, equal funding for public education, municipal infra-structure, equal employment opportunity, and non-discriminatory policing practices were based upon equal treatment.

Leaving aside the moral issue of treating all citizens equally, policy change lies in Israel's self-interest. Repairing her relationship with her Arab citizens will not resolve the broader problem of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem. Repairing her relationship with her Arab citizens is a good place to begin.

**JACK ZWICKER**

**B.A., LL.B., LL.M (ADR), Med., C. Arb**

**Markham, Ontario**

**Tel (416) 461-8387**

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