

BEHIND the HEADLINES

VOLUME 61 NUMBER 1

The Israeli/Palestinian
Conundrum:

Is there a way out?

MICHAEL BELL

Contributions on topical foreign policy, international affairs and global issues should be addressed to:

Behind the Headlines, CIA
205 Richmond Street West, Suite 302
Toronto, Canada M5V 1V3
Telephone: 416-977-9000
Facsimile: 416-977-7521
E-mail: mailbox@ciia.org
Submissions, submitted by disk or e-mail, with a minimum number of endnotes, must not exceed 7,000 words.

The mission of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs is to promote an understanding of international affairs and Canada's role in a changing world by providing interested Canadians with a non-partisan, nation-wide forum for informed discussion, analysis, and debate. The views expressed in *Behind the Headlines* are those of the authors.

© 2004 Canadian Institute of
International Affairs

Published quarterly
\$4.95 per single issue
\$19.95 per year
(Canadian addresses add 7% GST)
GST Registration No. 10686 1610 RT

Date of issue – April 2004
ISSN 0005-7983
Publications Mail Registration
No. 09880

Editor:
Robert Johnstone

The Israeli/Palestinian conundrum: Is there a way out?

MICHAEL BELL

Throughout my career I have been witness to any number of bilateral disputes. When outside players decide to offer or impose their good offices, they often tend to use a universalist template in the negotiating process, with little regard for the historic, cultural and symbolic geneses of problems. Sidestepping these points of self-definition, in my experience, seriously complicates the process of reconciling differences because it ignores why individuals and groups act as they do. It ignores what makes them tick.

The present crisis in relations between Israelis and Palestinians is one of the most profound in the history of their shared dispute, originating in the 19th century. Today that confrontation is manifest in a particularly virulent and intractable form; but despite those very harsh realities, it is the moral responsibility of leaders on both sides, battered and bruised as they are, to find a way out. There have been brave attempts, most recently the Oslo process of 1993,¹ but since its collapse in the summer of 2000 Palestinians and Israelis have been unable to grasp the nettle. They are now consumed by suspicion, distrust and indeed hatred. But force of circumstance no longer allows them such luxury. They can afford nothing less than success in controlling the violence and moving to resolution. In the current climate these goals may seem impossibly challenging, each side having inculcated a culture of demonization of the other. One has to hope that survival instincts force a sharp learning curve and produce the grit necessary to make tough choices.

The ongoing war between Palestinians and Israelis ultimately threatens the destruction of both. It makes agreement between them urgent, even if today both seem incapable of fair-minded accommodation. The considerable progress made in the 1990s, under the

Formerly Canadian Ambassador to Israel, Jordan and Egypt, and currently Senior Fellow on Diplomacy in the Munk Centre for International Studies, University of Toronto

Oslo process, indicated a new maturity among progressive elites on both sides, in recognizing that neither Palestinians nor Israelis had the capacity to control exclusively the territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. This realism led to mutual if uneasy recognition under Oslo that, for there to be peace, two viable states must exist in the small land mass of some 27,000 square kilometres that in 1920 became the British Mandate of Palestine. That Mandate was created in the Great Power carve-up which followed the First World War.²

The Oslo process inspired much hope yet collapsed in the summer of 2000. The weight of decision-making became too heavy. Mutual trust was too fragile to sustain a process full of possibility but fraught with difficulties over final status issues, particularly the future of Jerusalem and the rights of Palestinian refugees. With failure to agree came frustration, despair and, in turn and under provocation, a Palestinian uprising, called the Al Aqsa Intifada. The toxicity of events surrounding this uprising is the reality of today. It is this poison which must be extracted if Palestinians and Israelis are to avoid mutual destruction. That extraction can be successful only if each side is prepared to accept the realities of the other's historical experience. To recognize the importance of the culture, history and mythology of the other can make situations seem almost impossibly difficult. To exclude them, however, means certain failure. Success requires mutual understanding, acknowledgement of the real and imagined history of both peoples and recognition of the need of both for dignity.

The current proposal of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, that Israel withdraw entirely from the Gaza Strip and dismantle all 17 Jewish settlements there, despite its controversial reception, may just provide the beginning of a way forward. For it to do so however mindsets beset by exclusionary impulses will have to change dramatically. Many doubt they will.

THE ROOTS OF THE IMPASSE

The crisis we live with now was spawned in Europe during the late 19th century. The pogroms of 1881–1882 destroyed, amid much else, any hope that the Russian Jewish community had of achieving equality and opportunity under czarist rule. Russian Jews flocked to Palestine between 1882 and 1903, creating a community of more than 50,000, and thereafter migration from Europe continued apace. This movement, which became the lifeblood of Zionism, was given its philosophical underpinnings by a number of impressive

conceptualizers. Its most prominent advocate was Theodore Herzl, who wrote in 1895: “We are a people—one people. We have tried everywhere to merge ... It is not permitted us.”

The consequent idea of a national homeland for a persecuted people gave birth to a community whose sense of purpose was and remains unique. This longing was coupled with a strong attachment to the land of the ancient Israelites and the site of the Jewish Temple. As the population of Jews in the Holy Land grew, so did their ambition to create a state of their own on that very turf. These efforts were incalculably abetted by the Balfour Declaration of 2 November 1917, which legitimized the Zionist enterprise internationally. Jewish immigrants built their own institution of governance and community, called the Yishuv, within the bi-national entity of the British Mandate.

When the British Mandate in Palestine was established in 1920, the Arab population numbered 600,000. They were mostly Muslim, albeit with an important Christian minority. Their allegiance was to clan, village and religious communities. The exception was a relatively narrow urban elite which initially focused its political hopes on an emergent Greater Syria and then, when that enterprise failed, on a new Palestinian Arab identity. This feeling of distinctiveness was galvanized as the Zionist enterprise came into full bloom. Although both the Mandate and Jewish settlement brought a higher standard of living and relative material well-being to Palestinian Arabs, Zionism created a vivid sense of inferiority, displacement and fear among them. The intensity of Palestinian Arab feelings erupted during the 1920s, culminating in countrywide riots in 1929, which included the massacre of many members of the long-established Jewish community in Hebron. Rebellion broke out again in 1936 and lasted until 1939, when the British lost control of much of the country. That Arab uprising was referred to by the British authorities as “the Disturbances” but by Palestinians as “the Great Arab Revolt.”

Despite Arab opposition and violence, the Zionist enterprise continued to gain momentum. The final impetus toward statehood came from those who escaped the fate of the Holocaust’s six million. The remnants of Europe’s Jews, with the aid of a massive effort by Palestinian Jewry and support from the United States, reached Palestine determined to establish, with those already there, an independent Jewish homeland.

In 1947 the British, no longer willing or able to manage this confrontation or the radical Jewish violence directed against them as

occupiers, submitted the Palestine problem to the United Nations. The UN adopted a partition plan for Palestine on 29 November 1947.³ The Palestinian Arabs could not accept that division of what they felt was their homeland. Full-scale inter-communal warfare broke out. The Palestinians gained support when the armies of their Arab neighbours joined the conflict in an attempt to frustrate partition and put an end to the embryonic Jewish state. But the Israelis met the challenge in what they called the War of Independence but which the Palestinians referred to as the Naqba, meaning “the Disaster.”

When the fighting ended, and armistice agreements were signed in 1949, the Israeli presence went considerably beyond the boundaries established for the Jewish state in the partition plan. Areas of respective control were formally defined by what is called the Green Line, drawn in grease pencil by the armistice negotiators on a table map at a meeting under UN auspices in Rhodes. Seventy-eight per cent of the former Mandate was to be controlled by Israel, while the remaining 22 per cent would fall under Jordanian (the West Bank) and Egyptian (the Gaza Strip) rule. As a consequence of the fighting in 1947 and 1948, many tens of thousands of Palestinians were displaced. Often their towns and villages were obliterated.

Some 20 years later, the West Bank and Gaza fell to Israel in the Six Day War of 1967. This conflict was forced on the Israelis by the confrontational tactics of the embodiment of Arab nationalism at the time, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt's president. Nasser himself was the victim of a highly effective Soviet disinformation campaign, which falsely claimed that the Israelis were mobilizing. The West Bank and Gaza were then inhabited not only by indigenous Palestinians but by many refugees from within the state of Israel who had lost their homes in the 1947–1948 fighting. UN Security Council Resolution 242, passed unanimously on 22 November 1967, called for Israel's withdrawal but with a negotiated and mutually satisfactory evacuation clearly intended. No withdrawal took place, however, because the parties could not agree on its extent or the conditions for it. Given their humiliation, the Arabs refused to negotiate. The West Bank and Gaza were deemed “occupied territory” by the international community under the terms of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

Israel refused to accept this definition. Israelis instead began settling the West Bank, East Jerusalem and, to a lesser extent, Gaza, as a means of asserting their claim to those lands. They did so hesitantly at first, carefully delineating where such habitations would be

allowed. Their aim was to define new boundaries for their state. However, when the nationalists of the Revisionist Zionist movement came to power in 1978, with Menachem Begin as prime minister, virtually all areas of the West Bank became fair game. Today over 400,000 Israelis, half of them in East Jerusalem, live in uneasy coexistence in the occupied territories in the midst of over four million Palestinians. The area encompassed by Israeli municipalities on the West Bank extends to over 40 per cent of the land. Land is most often acquired for reasons formally defined as security considerations or on other legal pretexts which most find dubious.

This policy of expansion, coupled with the confrontational attitude of nationalist Israeli settlers, has led to increasing fear among Palestinians that what remains of their homeland is being sucked up relentlessly, thereby denying them any hope of a viable state. Furthermore, the construction of Israel's barrier, whatever legitimate security reasons may support it, is almost certain to lead to the de facto annexation of parts of the West Bank. Together with Israeli corridors through the West Bank to the Jordan valley and the ever tightening Israeli grip on East Jerusalem, the barrier has led to widespread despair among Palestinian moderates who see no resolution to their plight.

Palestinian sense of identity had been strengthened after 1948 by Israeli independence. It had been intensified further after the 1967 conflict when their sense of dispossession became complete. Between the 1947 and 1967 wars, the surrounding Arab states did their best to control and manipulate the Palestinians. They tried to use the Palestinian desire for political self-fulfillment for their own particular national interests. With the second massive defeat of Arab armies in the 1967 war, however, and with the humiliation and shame it provoked, this pan-Arab strategy was discredited and collapsed. It was replaced by the independent Palestinian nationalism of Yasser Arafat, first as leader of the Fatah movement and subsequently as Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization. He became, and in certain ways remains, the iconic embodiment of the Palestinian people, beleaguered and under pressure, but intent on realizing self-determination by whatever means.

HOW OSLO ALMOST WORKED AND WHY IT FAILED

The struggle between Palestinians and Israelis has deep historic and sociological roots. The sense of identity, determination and national purpose of each is clear, but their struggle for the same real estate has made them bitter enemies. It was not until the secret negotiations

that led to the Oslo accords that their leaderships began to adjust definitively their respective territorial visions. By the time the Oslo documents were signed in 1993, they were able to accept and acknowledge publicly, albeit often with difficulty, that only through the realization of two viable separate and independent states, within the former British Mandate territory, could each achieve security and dignity. The positions of those leaders were rejected by many, both Israelis and Palestinians, who viewed Oslo as a sellout. Some Palestinians, including the respected academic Edward Said, believed that Yasser Arafat had been outmaneuvered by the Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, and would lose Palestine forever for the Arabs. Many Israelis swore that their prime minister was selling out his country's vital security interests and many of its most sacred sites to an unrepentant terrorist still firmly resolved to destroy the Jewish state.

But the Oslo process had legs. It brought the parties close to agreement through difficult and frustrating negotiations which yielded unheard-of conceptual breakthroughs. It proved that leaders could grow and their ideas could evolve. When the possibility of land swaps between the embryonic Palestinian state and Israel was first mooted, initial Israeli thought was based on a nine-for-one equation in their favor to accommodate Israel's security and demographic concerns. The Israeli state would expand and its Palestinian counterpart would shrink under that ratio. To many, including me, it seemed obvious that this would be unacceptable. Israeli officials at first balked at any suggestion that these land swaps be one-to-one. Ultimately, however, they recognized that their preferred ratio was unrealistic and they altered it. Sensitivity to the needs, culture and dignity of the other, which this change in policy reflected, is the essential underpinning of any successful negotiation. And for much of the time, even if it came imperfectly and with difficulty, this necessity was recognized with Oslo.

There was never official concurrence with the terms of a proposed peace during the Oslo process. This could come only with a formal agreement, but much common ground was found. The 1949 Green Line would form the basis of the border, although this was subsequently modified to include land swaps. The figure of 22 per cent, the proportion of the Mandate territory under Arab rule until 1967, would define the size of the Palestinian state. Israeli settlements east of the amended Green Line would be dismantled and their populations moved. The return of Palestinian refugees to the Jewish state would be limited to thousands.⁴ (There was, however, continuing

disagreement on how this movement would be characterized. The “family reunification” rubric for refugees was all that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak could accept. The “right of return” was judged essential to save Palestinian face and, in particular, to satisfy those in the refugee camps.) Jewish-inhabited quarters of Jerusalem would remain under Israeli control, and Arab Jerusalem would fall under Palestinian sovereignty. Noteworthy was Palestinian willingness to accept Israeli sovereignty over Jewish settlements built since 1967 in occupied East Jerusalem on the basis of land swaps. A give-and-take dynamic had been fostered by the process. Prime Minister Barak, for instance, told Canadian prime minister Jean Chrétien in the fall of 1999 that he had already gone farther in broadening his paradigm than he had ever thought possible.

Despite this growth in mutual understanding and a readiness to embrace options previously rejected, the Oslo process collapsed during the Camp David meeting of 11–25 July 2000. Much has been written about how personalities derailed that enterprise. Perhaps the process was pushed too far too fast. Prime Minister Barak’s government was falling in ruins around him for domestic reasons, and he wanted movement fast. US President Bill Clinton was hungry for the Nobel Prize and wanted an agreement before his departure from office. The Palestinian delegation was badly divided.

Yasser Arafat had done little to prepare the Arabs for hard decisions on final status. He frequently asserted that Israeli offers were simply tactics to perpetuate the occupation, rather than publicly underlining the progress made during deliberations. Perhaps he was protecting himself from a bullet to the head, as he had little backing from the Arab states and significant opposition within his own polity. He feared being labeled a traitor to the Palestinian cause and was therefore unwilling to contemplate the end of claims against the Israeli state. Some characterize this attitude as a failure of leadership, which I believe it was; others see it as a necessity for his survival. All the while Barak continued to expand Jewish settlements as he tried to temporize with domestic power brokers, thereby sowing skepticism as to his real position. Although great efforts were made and much success achieved, at the end of the day, neither side proved capable of sustaining essential understanding of the other’s requirements.

Perhaps final agreement was impossible and certainly all the players made serious mistakes, but Oslo, Camp David and the last-ditch effort to save the negotiations in talks at the Egyptian resort of Taba in early 2001 were in important respects a major triumph.

Despite the ensuing violence which dogs us today, the parameters for a workable permanent settlement were established. If and when the parties sit together again on the basis of minimum justice for both, this framework will be the starting point. This is why, for instance, the Israeli ultra-right, following the collapse of the peace process, labeled its conceptualizers “the Oslo traitors.” They feared that the ideas Oslo had generated had indelibly penetrated the psyches of both sides. They worried that the creative dynamism unleashed could destroy their ambitions for a Greater Israel stretching from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean.

THE DESCENT INTO VIOLENCE

Following Oslo’s collapse, there was a short lull as both governments calculated whether they should try to save the process or abandon it. Recrimination proved the easier option and took hold. Trust, fragile at the best of times, rapidly eroded. On 2 August 2002, Israeli foreign minister David Levy resigned. He blamed Prime Minister Barak for having deceived his supporters by backtracking on a promise to keep Jerusalem whole, under Israeli sovereignty. On 8 August a terrorist’s bomb exploded in a Jerusalem pizzeria, Sbarros, leaving 15 dead and 10 injured.

During the uneasy September which followed, Barak was confronted with a very difficult choice. Should he object to a high-profile, politically loaded visit by the right-wing leader of the opposition, Ariel Sharon, to the Temple Mount in East Jerusalem, the most sacred of Jewish sites? For Muslims, that same place is called the Haram Al Sharif, the Noble Sanctuary, where, according to tradition, Muhammad ascended into heaven on his night journey. It is the third-holiest place in Islam after Mecca and Medina and has been in Muslim possession since the seventh century. Each side cherishes the importance of that site within its own religious tradition. That physical symbol is sacred for both. Non-Muslims have traditionally been allowed to visit the Haram platform by the Islamic authorities but they have not been permitted to pray on the site. Furthermore, observant Jews would not set foot on the mount, concerned that they would inadvertently desecrate the site of the ancient Jewish Temple’s holy of holies. Obviously Ariel Sharon felt differently, but he had to obtain Prime Minister Barak’s concurrence because of the security questions involved. This holy ground had been a flashpoint since the mandate began, and the Israeli opposition leader was about to prove that little had changed.

Ehud Barak recognized that Sharon’s tactic was built on political opportunism. He calculated that Sharon planned to use this visit to

the Haram Al Sharif to outflank his rival for the Likud Party leadership, Benjamin Netanyahu. The walk would reassert Sharon's tough-guy image and would thereby reassure his constituents. Prime Minister Barak felt his own partisan political interests would be served by giving his consent, because he considered Sharon a weaker challenger than Netanyahu in any general election. Refusing to allow the visit, on the other hand, would reinforce the belief among uncertain Israeli electors that he, Barak, was ready to trade off the city's most sacred Jewish sites.

The Prime Minister was also aware that such a visit would deepen Palestinians' fears for their future. Nevertheless, he gambled on allowing it, judging that while Palestinians would view it with alarm, they would ultimately acquiesce. As it happened, Barak made the wrong bet, and the walk on the Temple Mount became Ariel Sharon's walk to government. Palestinian rioting broke out the next day, and in their attempts to control it, the Israeli security forces fatally wounded demonstrators. The violence continued and, in their response to the chaos and the brutality of Palestinian terror, the Israeli electorate, not unnaturally, voted in Sharon with a landslide on 6 February 2001. That victory increased the level of Palestinian anxiety. Ariel Sharon was and is deeply mistrusted by Palestinians as the self-declared "father" of the settlement exercise, as the leading advocate in the 1970s and 1980s of the "Jordan is Palestine" thesis and, more dramatically still, as the man they hold responsible for the massacres at Sabra and Shatila in 1982 during the Lebanese civil war.

Palestinians, already on a psychological knife-edge, did more than remonstrate.⁵ Young protestors filled the streets, threw stones, burned flags and attacked Israeli settlements. Settlers, as well as Israeli soldiers, opened fire, and armed Palestinian militias responded in kind. Gradually the violence took a still more disturbing form. Civilian Israelis, wherever they lived, became the target of Palestinian terrorists in an ongoing series of indiscriminate attacks. These paralyzed Israeli social and economic life and raised inter-ethnic warfare to new levels.

The Islamists of Hamas and Islamic Jihad initially exercised a near monopoly on this indiscriminate violence, but eventually the underground military arm of Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement joined in the carnage. Whether Arafat was a direct party to this action, or whether he simply turned a blind eye, is uncertain in my mind. There is no doubt, however, that under the brunt of the Israeli Defense Forces' tough response, Fatah cadres became convinced that they had to join in the terror to be seen as legitimate and relevant in

the eyes of the Palestinian street. Action and counteraction tore Palestinian society apart. In their tactics and responses, the failure of the parties to understand one another became once again depressingly clear.

Today, almost four years after the Intifada's outbreak, Israelis and Palestinians remain locked in a bloody embrace. That the present confrontation has endured so long is attributable to a multitude of mistakes. Prime Minister Sharon has not developed a plan for political engagement with the Palestinians, and perhaps does not really want one. Until his recent Gaza initiative the former general has acted as though the iron fist alone could assure the security Israelis need. During my tenure in Tel Aviv, in my discussions with his ministers and senior advisers, they repeatedly insisted that Israel would do nothing to help moderate Palestinians assert themselves.

In one particularly ill-timed maneuver, the Israeli army destroyed most of Yasser Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah, with the Palestinian Authority president trapped inside. They did so precisely at the moment when reform politicians from Arafat's Fatah movement were on their way to deliver him an ultimatum. That challenge had been designed to force Arafat out of the power structure and allow a moderate, Mahmoud Abbas, popularly known as Abu Mazen, to take over.

Palestinians have also made catastrophic mistakes. They failed to understand that indiscriminate violence against civilians would make Israelis unwilling to embark on a course of negotiation and compromise. Arafat never understood that carrying the violence from the settlers and soldiers in the West Bank and Gaza into Israel proper would only reinforce Israel's Holocaust mentality. He initially thought that violence would push the Israelis to give more, but he should have known it would only stiffen their resistance. Wrong once again, and matters were soon beyond his control.

WHY OUTSIDERS DON'T GET IT

Many western diplomats in Israel assess the Arab-Israeli situation without attributing sufficient weight to its genesis. They often do so because they fear losing the ear of their governments if their assessments and recommendations appear too complex. In their discourse, they give the impression that the confrontation might be well on its way to a solution, if only one side or the other would simply change this or that particular strategy. They characterize themselves as "optimistic" and "hopeful" that early progress can be made: if, for instance, Sharon were to abandon his ideology or Arafat were to

leave the scene. A number of colleagues during my most recent tour in Tel Aviv, from 1999 to 2003, confided that to convey intractability stemming from the historic and social roots of the dispute to their capitals would cause their judgment to be doubted. They did not want to be accused of “localitis,” the diplomatic disease in which foreign service officers lose perspective because they identify too deeply with a given group or issue.

More serious still has been the situation in Washington, where the Bush administration has seemed largely incapable of viewing the dispute in any way other than through its own ideological prism. The State Department, which possesses experience and expertise, has been largely pushed aside in favor of the National Security Council, the neo-cons in the Defense Department and their allied think-tanks as the source for policy ideas. Disparities in culture and historic experience seldom cloud this lens. The neo-cons believe that their theoretical constructs of universal imperatives can be transplanted from one society to another with only minimal adaptation.

Vice-President Dick Cheney and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice are clearly on record stating that there can be little progress toward the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict until democracy is embraced by the Arab world. This both ignores historic experience and is a formula for failure. There are peace treaties between Israel and its Jordanian and Egyptian neighbors that have proved durable, where economic, political and strategic self-interests have dictated coexistence and co-operation with authoritarian regimes. Hard sociological realities mean that the Arab states, while capable of increasing participatory decision-making, are unlikely to develop or be capable of sustaining western democratic models in any foreseeable future. All attempts to date—and there were many in the immediate post-colonial period—have been failures. Today American success in Iraq is moot at the very best. Serious doubts abound, even at the heart of the administration, despite official denials. Relative success in some of the small Gulf states, boasted of by the White House, is almost certainly being oversold. It is no template for the great Arab countries of the Levant and North Africa.

Ignoring deeply felt emotions, based on real and imagined history, may seem to some to offer greater hope for engagement and resolution because it makes matters appear less complicated and more straightforward. Broad templates impose structure and order. Such thinking is deeply flawed, however, and leads to bad policy because it ignores the culturally based reasons individuals and communities think the way they do.

I can also accept the dangers of obsession with the past, a chasm into which old hands with too much cynicism and not enough imagination often fall. Both parties must dig deep in order to find wisdom and mutual understanding. With recognition of the other's wants and needs new options for the future welfare of both questing nations could be found. The true test is to prevent this mutual recognition with its implicit complications from discouraging constructive engagement.

WHY INSIDERS DON'T GET IT

The impasse that has turned the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation into another 100 years' war stems from the claims of both peoples to the same land. In the early years of the 20th century, Yitzhak Epstein, an educator and dedicated Zionist, made enormous efforts to foster Jewish understanding of the Palestinian Arab predicament, but to little avail. The Zionist diplomat par excellence and later Israel's first president, Chaim Weizmann, strove to reach an accommodation with the leaders of the Arab revolt of the First World War, the Hashemite family. Before the Great Power carve-up of the Middle East, the Hashemites had expectations, encouraged by the British for their own imperial purposes, of controlling all the former Ottoman territories. That dynasty displayed willingness to accommodate Zionism, but this flexibility was in direct opposition to sentiment among the Palestinians themselves and to the emerging Arab nationalist movement headquartered in Damascus. Arab nationalists claimed that sooner or later Jewry would engulf the whole of Palestine, but characteristically they chose to boycott discussion.

Subsequent competition and conflict over the control of the British Mandate territories grew from these early setbacks. Nevertheless mainstream Zionists evinced pragmatism at the time in seeking a Jewish state and—conscious as they were of demography—one which would not embrace a heavy Arab presence within its boundaries. Their willingness to negotiate with an eye to the future was manifest throughout the Mandate. Although in 1947–1948 Arabs fled from much of Israel, and were vigorously encouraged to do so by both Arab and Jewish leaderships, David Ben-Gurion, the leader of the Yishuv and Israel's first prime minister, made clear his view that populated cities like Hebron were to be avoided to minimize the number of Palestinians over which Israel would rule.

Faced with the 78 per cent/22 per cent territorial split once the fighting stopped in 1948, the Arabs refused to accept this division,

as indeed they had spurned the 1947 UN partition plan. This rejectionism, from their viewpoint, seemed entirely logical. They would not accept their displacement, the loss of their homes and property or the abrogation of their identity. But with their second clear defeat in 1967, the Palestinians began to rethink their predicament. Finally, after many tentative steps and much internal debate, moderates moved toward accepting a two-state solution: Palestinian beside Israeli, based on the Green Line as their shared border. This approach began to flower with Oslo.

In the aftermath of the 1967 Israeli victory, the Labor Party, in power since the foundation of Israel, was determined to achieve direct negotiations with the Arabs. But it wanted to hold all the conquered territories until those negotiations could be successful and peace achieved. Critically, Labor put certain areas of the West Bank and the other occupied territories outside the realm of negotiation. They included East Jerusalem, to be annexed for historic, national and religious reasons. Other substantial areas were then deemed necessary for defense, such as the entire Jordan valley. Revisionist Zionism, which laid claim to all the British Mandate territory for the Jewish state, remained a minority movement until Begin's election victory in 1978. With that victory, there was a sea change in Israeli politics. As I have discussed, a massive settlement campaign began, designed to integrate the West Bank and Gaza piecemeal into Israel. Maps were changed in an attempt to obliterate the Green Line as a reference point. A new Israeli lexicon emerged in which "the West Bank" became "Judea and Samaria," to emphasize the area's Biblical connection to the Jewish people. Prime Minister Begin deemed the conquered lands "liberated" territories.

Given this shared and uneasy history, there should have been no surprise when the violence which erupted in September 2000 destroyed the fragile trust Israelis and Palestinians had laboriously developed. The monumental Oslo effort to understand the other was swept away as quickly as Barak's government because mutual confidence, with its very fragile underpinnings, disintegrated immediately. The old exclusivist ideologies immediately resurfaced. Since demonization had been bred in the bone, rejection of the other became the natural alternative to the political failure witnessed at Camp David. It proved a simple matter to fall back on the old rhetoric and look inward to the old fears: suspicion and insecurity framed by exclusivist national narratives based on both historic memory and imagined history. Battered, the moderates on both sides disengaged. The resulting tension made familiar paradigms

more comfortable than any effort to understand what had really taken place and why. Anger and distrust took hold on both sides.

The Jewish sense of physical, psychological and religious isolation, the product of a long European tradition of anti-Semitism culminating in the Holocaust, bears heavily on the contemporary Israeli world view. The pain of Jews through two millennia speaks volumes. The Jews had been physically confined to certain quarters of the great cities of Europe, at times unable to inherit, forced into specific professions and criticized until today for the skills they had no choice but to develop to survive. Through centuries they were the victims of massacres and pogroms, the last of which occurred in Poland well after the end of the Second World War.

Although I cannot accept his world view, I understood Ariel Sharon and others on the Israeli right better when I heard him address the nation at the annual Holocaust Memorial Day following his accession to power. He lauded Holocaust education but said too much emphasis had been placed on Jewish passivity and not enough on their resistance during that tragic period. He emphasized that Jews had fought the Nazis from their ghettos and had made a sizable and significant contribution to Allied armies. Despite this effort, the Allies had taken no steps against the death camps but instead had allowed them to continue their murderous activity until the war ended. Jews must be self-reliant, the Prime Minister stressed; Israelis could count only on the force they themselves could muster. Compromise would be seen as weakness, emboldening the other. This Hobbesian analysis has deep resonance among this bruised people in the light of the new Palestinian Intifada.

Prime Minister Sharon throughout his career has used the iron-fist approach when confronting his enemies. In his view, it is the only language that is understood and respected. He and his like-minded colleagues believe concern for the dignity of others is therefore misplaced because that sentiment has never been and will never be reciprocated. In the Middle Eastern jungle, Israelis must do what they have to do in order to survive. Hence the daily suffering and humiliations incurred by the Palestinians, their displacement, restrictions on their freedom of movement and their inability to sustain themselves economically are necessary for the security of Israel. The construction of the barrier now snaking through the West Bank is designed to protect Israelis from the terror they have had to suffer for the last four years. In Sharon's view the fence is not being built to hurt the Palestinians, but where it does, it is a justifiable consequence of ensuring Israeli security.

Sharon's Hobbesian analysis complements that of the religious nationalist movement. The views of a relatively small number of highly motivated Israelis, whose commitment is to populate and control all of the ancient land of Israel, are central to Israeli policy making, particularly when governments are dominated by the right wing. These radicals are able to exercise inordinate influence in Israel's bifurcated political system. Massive funds are dedicated to the support of settlements deep in the West Bank, at the expense of the welfare of Israelis at large. This trade-off often goes without comment domestically and is almost invariably accepted as legitimate among diaspora leaderships. That Israel's settlement policies bring it near-universal international condemnation is explained away as prejudice against the Jewish state.

That the Palestinians feel trapped by the virtually unimpeded growth of the Jewish presence on the hilltops surrounding their towns and villages is something too few mainstream Israelis reflect upon. That many Palestinians are cut off from essentials like basic medical care, for instance, because of restrictions on their movements, would be too disturbing to contemplate. Psychological survival often seems to require that Israelis ignore the other's suffering. Yet they are caught because, with a demoralized and unpopular political left, there is no peace platform in sight. Many Israelis cannot bring themselves to believe peace possible after so much blood has been spilled. The clearly stated goals of Palestinian Jihadists to eliminate the Jewish state lends real substance to these fears. Reaction among the Israeli mainstream to the present confrontation borders on despair. Some 200,000 Israelis have emigrated since the Intifada began.

The Palestinians are caught in their own vise. Arafat's initial unwillingness and subsequent inability to control the ongoing violence against Israelis drove Israel to use overwhelming military force to deal with the threat. The Palestinian leader's feudal practices in government have undermined his legitimacy among his own people. Increasingly Arafat lives in a world of his own clouded fantasy. Foreign diplomats faced with his ramblings come away with little hope that he is in any way capable of meeting the leadership challenge. His claim that the ancient Jewish Temple was never in Jerusalem but either, depending on the day, in Nablus or in Yemen runs directly counter to irrefutable historic and archeological fact. Arafat and the many Palestinians who share this view thereby dismiss and discard one of the most profound symbols of Jewish life. In private, the great majority of the Palestinian elite are crystal clear that

the job is beyond the man. Yet there is no constitutional or other legal process to remove or replace him.

There is massive corruption in the Palestinian Authority, as indeed there is in many Middle Eastern societies. While Palestinians may have been prepared to tolerate a certain level of financial abuse, this point has long been passed. The present crisis has brought most of them severe poverty and loss of dignity. Most senior leaders of the mainstream Fatah movement run by Yasser Arafat are on the take. This graft increasingly undercuts their legitimacy on the street, as well as within the movement itself, particularly among the young. The result is greater sympathy and identification with Islamic radicals. Just as serious is the breakdown of the Palestinian Authority as a result of Israeli attacks on both its security and its civilian infrastructure in the early stages of the intifada. Today Palestinian towns and villages are ruled by a mix of virtually independent Fatah-linked fiefdoms or family and tribal alliances, often in open competition with armed political and criminal gangs. Outside Ramallah, the Palestinian Authority's presence is close to non-existent.

IS THERE A WAY OUT?

There may be, but it is not an easy one. Ultimately the parties will have to return to the principles of Oslo, whatever they may choose to call them. Political leaders on both sides will have to accept each other once again as representing legitimate national movements, deserving dignity, security and statehood. Both Palestinians and Israelis must remember that during the eight years of the Oslo talks they enjoyed relatively normal and peaceful lives. They should not forget it, and they should not let their political leaderships forget it, or they may never taste it again. Reconciliation will take time and be markedly difficult, but that process should start now.

Prime Minister Sharon's current proposals to dismantle all 17 Gaza settlements as part of a general Israeli withdrawal from that territory, and to remove four others from the West Bank, could offer a way to rekindle the process. But it too is fraught with difficulty. The most plausible explanation for the Prime Minister's new position is twofold. On a purely tactical basis: to take the pressure off and buy time by demonstrating, at home and abroad, that he is capable of a major diplomatic initiative. The chaos in the Palestinian Authority, the continuing rise of Hamas, the sharp drop in his own approval ratings and the apparently increasing possibility, as of this writing, that he will be criminally charged in the so-called Greek island affair may have convinced him that he must put

something on the table to restore domestic support and keep the United States behind him.

The Prime Minister's other rationale is strategic: by unilaterally withdrawing from Gaza to divest Israel of one and a half million Palestinians who constitute a major threat to the precarious population balance of Jews over Arabs in the territories Israel controls. This demographic reality may have finally convinced a skeptical Sharon and his colleagues that the very being and nature of the Jewish state is in jeopardy. There is near-universal acceptance, across the entire political spectrum, that by the end of this decade the population of the old British Mandate territory will contain equal numbers of Jews and Arabs. At all costs the Prime Minister wants to avoid any discussion of the single Israeli-Palestinian state solution which has been mooted by many Palestinians, as an alternative to the status quo.

Mr. Sharon may also believe that a Palestinian entity in Gaza will be incapable of meeting the challenge of governance. He may believe that the chaos that would result from this failure would absolve him of the need to make still tougher decisions about the future of the West Bank. There he advocates a series of Palestinian cantons encompassing about half of the territory of the West Bank, which amounts to about 10 per cent of the overall territory of the old British Mandate. His ambition would be to thicken the pattern of Israeli settlement in the remaining 50 per cent of the West Bank, where he and his allies intend that Israel will remain.

Whatever his motives, Sharon's readiness to embrace the prospect of disengagement from Gaza should be welcomed, not rejected. Should the Prime Minister be forced to depart the political scene because of his purported involvement in financial misdeeds, there is no reason to believe that his successor in the Likud Party—Benjamin Netanyahu, Ehud Olmert or whoever else—would change direction. The status quo is widely acknowledged as materially and psychologically intolerable by Israelis of all stripes. Particularly if Sharon resigns, a new face even with an old ideology could present a change in the interpersonal dynamic, thus allowing for renewed discussion. True territorial withdrawal and the removal of even some settlements, something which has not happened since the occupation began in 1967, could be a precedent of utmost significance, particularly if carefully nursed. It would convey the message to Palestinians that the Israeli grasp may not be inexorable. It would help acclimatize Israelis to the idea that occupied territories are not necessarily essential for security and indeed may well be a liability.

In recent weeks the Americans appear to have used their influence to ensure that Israel follows through on the commitment to withdrawal. This American role is essential. Neither party to the dispute is likely to be able to take the tough decisions which will have to be made left to themselves. Sharon's inclination to bloody Gaza before he leaves that territory is less than auspicious. The Yassin and Rantisi assassinations are the foretaste. The meltdown of Palestinian Authority instruments of governance, Yasser Arafat's out-and-out incompetence and Fatah's hemorrhage of members to Hamas and Islamic Jihad suggest there is little chance of brave moves by the Palestinian leadership.

The theology of extreme Islamists aside, the appalling conditions in Gaza are a breeding ground for terror. There are over 25,000 Palestinians for each square kilometer of Gaza, the highest population density in the world. That number grows to a suffocating 50,000 plus for each square kilometre in the refugee camps. Services are deplorable. Poverty stands at over 65 per cent and unemployment at over 80 per cent. Such challenges are daunting, but the ultimate costs of letting this brew continue to boil will be profound for both peoples, ultimately threatening their very existence.

The Bush administration has shown its concern that the Gaza process be accompanied by the dismantling of settlements on the West Bank, albeit on a much more limited basis. This linkage is essential if Palestinian moderates are to have hope, speak out and take risks. The Sharon government has digested the administration's insistence on linkage between the West Bank and Gaza. With a mixture of American carrots and sticks directed at both Israelis and Palestinians, it is just possible that a viable Palestinian entity, benefiting from strong international support on the ground, including peacekeepers with teeth, could be put in place.

But the entire Gaza process remains in question. The recent April 14 meeting between Prime Minister Sharon and President Bush concerning the Gaza pullout was on the one hand encouraging: Israel committed itself formally to definitively leaving Palestinian territory. On the other, the Americans made a series of commitments to the Israelis that, no matter how much they may profess the contrary, fundamentally alter the equation in Israel's favor and at the Palestinian's cost.

President Bush accepted that Israelis had the right to annex Palestinian territory in the West Bank if they moved settlers into a particular region thereby altering the demographic balance of that piece of territory. This means American acceptance that the stronger

party, Israel, can legitimize land grabs made contrary to international law at the expense of the weaker party. It means that no longer will the debate be about the 78/22 percent split of the Palestine Mandate that Oslo had legitimized, at least as far as Washington is concerned. The United States has retreated from the well established view of the international community that it is for the parties themselves, Israelis and Palestinians, to negotiate their borders within the framework of United Nations Security Council Resolution 242. That resolution, passed following the Six Day war of 1967, called on Israel to withdraw from occupied territories including the West Bank and Gaza, within the framework of peace negotiations.

The American's, presumably in order to help Mr. Sharon win his Likud party plebiscite on Gaza withdrawal, also unilaterally put paid to even a token return of refugees to Israel itself, within the framework of a negotiated settlement. This is one of the most sensitive issues of the Israeli/Palestinian dispute. While there was broad acceptance within the Palestinian mainstream that only a token number of refugees would move to Israel, the symbols and emotions involved are of the utmost importance. That Mr. Sharon should disregard this should come as no surprise, given his world view. That the American's should show no appreciation that the two sides must come to a mutually satisfactory agreement, if peace is to be achieved and bring dignity, is profoundly depressing. It shows the Bush administration is still a prisoner of ideology, unable to relate to the basic needs of Palestinians.

There is still however a chance of saving the process, slim as it may seem, but Gaza provides an opportunity only if it is marshaled correctly. To do so however, the Americans will have to rethink their recent pronouncements and indeed their approach to the problem. They will have to ensure that Gaza constitutes only the first of a series of withdrawals from the occupied territories. Withdrawal will have to be closely coordinated. All of Gaza, where today some 7,000 Israelis control 20 per cent of the land, will have to be emptied of Jewish settlers. Infrastructure must be turned over to the Palestinians intact. Commercial movement into and out of Gaza will have to be assured. A mainstream and effective Palestinian government has to be established, although it will have to find a way of working with Hamas, which is increasingly popular. This process will require Israeli help but also substantial American and other Western participation. None of this will be easy, particularly with American mindsets. At best it may be a long shot. Success will require strong will all around, maximum commitment and determined

leadership, none of which has been much in evidence since the Intifada began.

Another challenge still is that to date Western governments, including Canada's, are hesitant to involve themselves in the Gaza project. After years of urging both parties to seek peace and professing willingness to help in any way possible, Canada and others now appear hesitant to put their collective muscle behind the political and economic struggle to make Gaza viable. They are worried about the security of any personnel they put on the ground. They calculate that the challenge cannot be met because there will be neither Israeli nor Palestinian co-operation: not from the Israelis because at best they will do nothing to make governance possible, and not from the Palestinians because they will be unable to create credible structures of government. In my view, however, we will make failure certain if we walk away from even the most remote opportunity to bring this conflict to resolution.

Rather than Gaza being the end of the process, as Prime Minister Sharon or his successors might like, it could be the first step. Movement would be slow and excruciating because trust needs to be completely rebuilt. Regenerating Gaza would be a process of years, but it could create a new dynamic, a fundamental shift not seen since the peace treaty with Egypt. Each success on the road could build more confidence. Public opinion could require that leaderships respond or risk losing power. With new ideas could come the optimism that allowed Oslo to grapple with the bias of a century. With the Palestinians in disarray, Israel in particular will have to have show courage and take the initiative. If Gaza fails, the violence will continue, the situation will fester further and both peoples will lose sight of their real interests and ultimately destroy their dearest dreams—their homelands.

NOTES

1. In 1992 Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin took office promising to negotiate peace with the Palestinians. Foreign Minister Shimon Peres initiated secret talks with the Palestine Liberation Organization that led to the Oslo agreements: Israel recognized the legitimacy of the PLO, and the PLO recognized Israel's right to exist; Israel extended autonomy to much of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, committing itself to withdraw from Gaza and Jericho within

five years; talks would continue to resolve Palestinian statehood, the status of Jerusalem and other final status issues.

2. At the Versailles peace conference, Britain and France sought trusteeships over parts of the Middle East. In 1920 Britain obtained the Mandate for Palestine, defined as the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. The Mandate text included the 1917 declaration by British Prime Minister Arthur Balfour supporting the goal of an eventual Jewish national home in Palestine.

3. UN Resolution 181 specified partition as follows: to the Arabs (70 per cent of the population), 45.4 per cent of the area; to the Jews (30 per cent of the population), 53.5 per cent; the balance of 1.1 per cent for Jerusalem, which would remain under a form of international administration.

4. The UN General Assembly, in Resolution 194 of December 1948, specified that persons displaced should have the choice of returning to their homes or receiving compensation. This resolution on the “right of return” is fundamental to the Palestinian collective memory and myth.

5. There was much debate in the aftermath of the outbreak of the second Intifada as to whether the violence had been planned for some time and Ariel Sharon’s walk was simply the pretext to unleash Palestinian terror. This is possible but to date there has been no release of convincing intelligence that I am aware of. More likely is that the initial outbreaks were spontaneous, just as they were with the first Intifada in December 1987. But this is in no way meant to suggest that Mr. Sharon’s intention was to provoke violence.

CANADIAN
INSTITUTE OF
INTERNATIONAL
AFFAIRS

INSTITUT
CANADIEN DES
AFFAIRES
INTERNATIONALES

CIIA / ICAI

THE WORLD THROUGH CANADIAN EYES

Canadian Institute of International Affairs
205 Richmond Street West, Suite 302
Toronto, ON M5V 1V3
Canada

Publications Mail Registration No. 40062474
Postage paid at Scarborough