

ISRAELI - PALESTINIAN NEGOTIATIONS: SURVEY OF THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

For the last 19 years, Israelis and Palestinians have been trying to find solutions to end their conflict. Although the need to live together should have brought both sides to find a solution, the conflict is “stuck” and no solution ending the conflict has been agreed upon. Despite the natural tendency to analyze the conflict by criticizing the allegedly strong side (which, in this case is Israel), the following article presents a short summary and overview of the past, the missed opportunities, the current matters, and an optimistic look to the future.

Tal Gat*



* Tal Gat is serving as the Deputy Consul General of Israel in Istanbul since 2009.

Since its establishment, the State of Israel has stretched its hand for peace to all neighboring states and their people. Israel regards peace as the basic principle in its integration in the region and has proved in the past that it is willing to offer major concessions to fulfill this aspiration. The majority of Israelis support the goal which was emphasized by the current government: two nation states, living next to each other in peace and security. Whereas Israelis understand the price and the concessions they will have to make, the Palestinians are yet to make the necessary concessions on their side.

If we learn something from history, it is that the lack of will to accept Israel as a legitimate part of the Middle East is not something that the Palestinians are the first to implement. Unfortunately, only after four wars and countless violent confrontations was the largest of the Arab countries, Egypt, ready to sign a peace agreement with Israel and bring an end to the bloody conflict between the two countries. No sooner was the Israeli hope that this agreement would be the cornerstone to additional agreements shattered. As a response, Egypt was banned from the Arab League and instead of following in Egypt's footsteps, the Middle East found itself in new bloody clashes, this time in the image of terrorist attacks against civilian and military targets. Infiltration, hostage taking and indiscriminate killings of civilians became the new tool of terrorist organizations, which were backed by members of the United Nations General Assembly. Next to the development of these non-state actors, the Middle East viewed the rise of a non-Middle Eastern actor with a revolutionary expansion ideology – Iran. All of these factors –the use of terror, the support given to terrorist organizations by other countries and the rise of a revolutionary expansionist agenda– shape the current conflict. For the last 30 years, Israel is at the forefront of combating this dangerous combination of terror and fundamental ideology.

Global changes in the beginning of the 1990s brought Israel's neighboring countries (among them the Palestinians) to choose negotiations over armed conflict. Israelis and Palestinians began negotiating on the principle of Palestinian autonomous rule. 1993 saw the signing of the "Oslo Agreements", followed a year later by the Cairo Agreements. Four years after the convening of the Madrid Conference, Palestinians enjoyed self-rule over major cities in the West Bank and in Gaza. Palestinians worked in Israel, exported their goods to Israel, Gaza International Airport was inaugurated and security forces from both sides were cooperating in a purpose to combat mutual threats.

However, these agreements, which aimed to solve the conflict by 1998, reached a deadlock. Hamas, an Iranian proxy operating within the Palestinian society threatened by a possible reconciliation set forth bloody terror attacks. The year 1996 saw the emergence of indiscriminate terrorist attacks against civilians in shopping

malls and buses, claiming the lives of Israelis, whether Jews or Arabs. Prime Minister Netanyahu set forth a two-dimensional approach to try and break the dead-lock: Military operations against those involved in terror and a peaceful initiative aiming to overcome these attacks, to respect previous agreements and to set hope for the future: withdrawal of part of the Israeli forces located in Hebron. What seemed to be a restart to the faltering peace negotiations reached a stalemate in 2000, not before Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat rejected a far-reaching proposal offered by then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak. Former U.S. President Bill Clinton pinpointed the side responsible of the failing of the talks: "I regret that in 2000 Arafat missed the opportunity to bring that nation into being and pray for the day when the dreams of the Palestinian people for a state and a better life will be realized in a just and lasting peace."¹

In order to divert the blame of the collapse of the negotiations, Arafat directed Palestinian officials and later militants to divert their weapons against Israelis. The deadly terrorist attack on the eve of Passover which took the lives of 30 Israelis² led Israel to a military offensive in the West Bank, targeting Hamas' military capability and Fatah's militant arms – Tanzim and the Al Aqsa Brigades. Not long afterwards, hoping to spark new negotiations, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon initiated a revolutionary policy: By the end of 2005, no

Israeli, whether military or civilian, would be left in the Gaza strip and Northern Samaria (i.e. the West Bank). The Palestinian dream in which no Israeli prevents the independent rule of Gaza strip could have come to life but hopes again were shattered. After fully implementing a policy which polarized its society, Israel found itself again sitting alone at the negotiating table. The Israeli withdrawal from Gaza was accompanied by continuation of mortar shelling. The Palestinians, failing to learn from history, interpreted the Israeli withdrawal as a victory to their terror acts of recent years. No sooner did Hamas come out as the winner in the Palestinian elections. Unfortunately, only then did the world learn to evaluate Hamas' violent conduct. In order to impose full power over the Gaza strip, Hamas militants began to ruthlessly cleanse the Strip from Fatah activists. Executions, attacks and throwing of living opponents from eight storied buildings were Hamas' tactics.

"If we learn something from history, it is that the lack of will to accept Israel as a legitimate part of the Middle East is not something that the Palestinians are the first to implement."

¹ Barry Rubin and Judith Colp Rubin (eds.), *Yasir Arafat, a Political Biography*, (New York:Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 281.

² "Passover Suicide Bombing at Park Hotel in Netanya", Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 27 March 2002, http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/2000_2009/2002/3/Passover%20suicide%20bombing%20at%20Park%20Hotel%20in%20Netanya

And again, the expectation that the Palestinians would know how to take advantage of political developments was shattered. A year after the last Israeli left the Gaza Strip, Gaza was ruled by a radical government implementing fundamental policies –that were decided upon in Tehran and Damascus– against its own people. Hamas' agenda, in which rockets continued exploding in Israeli villages surrounding the Strip, reached a new peak during July 2006. Hamas terrorists infiltrated Israel, attacked a nearby tank, killing two and taking one hostage. Since 25 June 2006, Corporal Gilad Shalit has been held captive under Hamas control. Other than a letter and a video, his family has not received any living evidence from him.

Since its takeover of the Gaza Strip, Hamas has strengthened its grip on the territory. Instead of taking care of its own people, Hamas continues to disregard basic Palestinian interests. The continuation of the launching of rockets and mortars targeting Israeli villages, placing one million Israeli lives under threat, reached a watershed line on 19 December 2008. An

"For the people of Gaza, negotiations will eventually bring change and will always be more fruitful than supporting radicalism."

option to continue the cease-fire was rejected by Hamas, followed by the launching of 87 mortars and rockets.³ Israel was left with no choice but to respond with a clear policy every responsible administration would initiate: the defense of its own people. Thwarting rocket launches into Israel and setting a blockade on Gaza in order to foil attempts to smuggle arms into Gaza. If Hamas would agree to the demands of

the Quartet, these Israeli policies would end the following day.⁴ Since the conclusion of operation "Cast Lead", little has changed. The people of Gaza continue to be the hostages of a radical administration implementing policies serving foreign interests, and still rely very much on humanitarian aid and donations.

Whereas Hamas continued to deteriorate lives of the Gazans, in the West Bank a different administration evolved: an administration which Israel has its share of disagreements with, but is ready to negotiate and abandon its use of terror. Henceforth, these negotiations, sometimes more successful and sometime less, have brought changes to the daily lives of Palestinians in the West Bank. Israel considers the development of the Palestinian economy an interest mutually shared

³ "Hamas Declares Israel Truce Over", *BBC News*, 22 December 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7791100.stm

⁴ "Quartet's Demands from Hamas: Recognizing Israel's Right to Exist, Stopping Terror and Acknowledging Previous Agreements", Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs Israel, November 2007 http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/2000_2009/2003/11/Israel-%20the%20Conflict%20and%20Peace-%20Answers%20to%20Frequent

with the Palestinian Authority and the international community. Israel recognizes the importance of international support to projects in the West Bank, to areas leading to economic development, capacity building, security and to the civil sectors. Moreover, Israel supports efforts to promote Palestinian development. The following are several numbers referring to the Palestinian economy in the beginning of 2010⁵:

- The Palestinian economy grew by eight percent in 2009.
- A new Palestinian city was built at the outskirts of Ramallah, named Rawabi.
- In Nablus a new shopping mall and cinema complex were opened.
- Thanks to French cooperation, a new industrial zone is being built in Bethlehem.
- Unemployment rate decreased to 17.8 percent (In 2008, unemployment rate was 19 percent.)
- Foreign investment increased by 600 percent.
- Palestinian GDP increased by 6.7 percent, per capita increased by 3.6 percent.

In addition, Israel has supported the building of an efficient security apparatus. Under the command of Lieutenant General Keith Dayton, American security forces have been facilitating the Palestinians in building a well-trained and reliable Palestinian security force. Five Palestinian National Security Force battalions, tasked with maintaining law and order within the West Bank have been established since this cooperation began.⁶

Nevertheless, the road to peace has proven to still remain bumpy. Once again, Israeli government's policies to restart negotiations received no response from the Palestinian side.

On 14 June 2009, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced his commitment to a lasting peace with the Palestinians based on the two-state solution. December 2009 saw a similar offer: being the first Israeli government to announce such a policy, the government announced a ten-month freeze to building in the settlements (not including Jerusalem). More than a year had passed since these announcements and no progress has been listed. Instead of considering these announcements as a springboard for making a progress, negotiations are stalled.

⁵ "Measures Taken by Israel in Support of the Palestinian Economy", Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Report of Israel to the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLIC)*, 13 April 2010, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/NR/rdonlyres/64676E73-7E29-4C86-B83F57245F07EA51/0/donor-sapril 2010.pdf>

⁶ "Lieutenant General Keith Dayton: United States Security Coordinator", *Ma'an News Agency*, 1 March 2010, <http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=265173>

17 years after establishing a direct negotiation mechanism between Israelis and Palestinians, Palestinians started demanding proximity talks. This last demand aroused pressure from both the West and the Arab league, to return the Palestinian negotiators to a direct talk mechanism.

Meanwhile, Palestinians named a square in Ramallah after Dalal Mughrabi, a terrorist charged with the hijacking of an Israeli bus and the killing of 37 of its passengers, among them 12 children in 1978.⁷ Unfortunately, Palestinians continue to educate their young through incitement and hatred. As if any future agreements will not be relevant to them, Palestinian children are watching weekly TV programs about their homeland Palestine, stretching from the river to the sea without mentioning the State of Israel, which the Palestinians have already recognized.⁸

Again, it seems that a deadlock has been reached: Israeli initiatives are ignored and no progress is made. But when stalling and buying time, one should remember that achieving peace is not just an Israeli goal. It is a goal shared by Israelis, Palestinians and the rest of the Middle Eastern populations. The above detailed facts about growth in the Palestinian economy in the West Bank should set a positive outlook of what can be achieved and how peoples' lives can change. For the people of Gaza, negotiations will eventually bring change and will always be more fruitful than supporting radicalism. For the Palestinian leadership in the West Bank, these detailed facts are only the beginning. Peace will bring prosperity, security and success; it will reduce extremism, illiteracy and foil the attempts of radical regimes to destabilize the region. Peace brings benefits that overcome the concessions. In order to achieve peace both sides will have to work hard, seize opportunities and make these concessions. The Israeli people understand the required price and the current government acknowledged it. The question, however, is: after 17 years of negotiating, is Palestinian leadership ready to make concessions?

⁷ Khaled Abu Toameh, "PA holds ceremony naming square after Fatah terrorist", *The Jerusalem Post*, 14 March 2010, <http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=170929>

⁸ "PA TV children's show depicts world without Israel", *Palestinian Media Watch*, 28 July 2010, http://www.palwatch.org/main.aspx?fi=157&doc_id=2674