

Opinion

Focus on 2-State Solution

> By Ziad Asali

Peace is not easy. Achieving it requires summoning the deepest forms of courage. It means examining one's darkest prejudices that dehumanize and demonize the other. The quest for mutual recognition of humanity and dignity is an arduous task.

The question facing both Israelis and Palestinians is: Do they prefer to cling to the pain of past injuries and the suffering of their forefathers, or will they move forward and build a better future for their children?

While there have been too many shrill voices lamenting the grievances of centuries between Israel and the Palestinians, there is a harmony that strums through us all. When we fight for peace, we don't fight against each other, but together and for all of us. This means accepting that there are like-minded people on the other side, and identifying, making common cause, and building peace with them.

Israelis and Palestinians live in the same land with divergent national narratives, and both want and need sovereignty and self-determination. The only means to reach a reasonable accommodation is to have two states, Israel and Palestine, living side-by-side in peace. No other solution has any serious prospect of ending the conflict and creating a modus vivendi between the parties. The two-state solution for all its faults is the only way out of the cycle of violence and hatred that has plagued Israel and the Palestinians since 1948.

This idea enjoys the support of solid majorities of both Israelis and Palestinians and of the international community. In many ways we have never been closer to realizing this all-important goal. And yet, as I write, the only realistic hope for the future is in serious jeopardy due to the actions of extremists, driven by nationalist fantasies or religious zealotry, among both Israelis and Palestinians.

Extremists on both sides feel that time is on their side. Some Israelis delude themselves that Palestinians over time will become exhausted or new generations will forget their national identity. They believe they will win complete control of the entire area between the river and the sea. Meanwhile, some radical Palestinians are under the illusion that Israel is an artificial foreign imposition akin to the Crusader states that cannot last and will eventually collapse. They too believe that time is their greatest weapon, and that the best strategy therefore is to never compromise.

We cannot afford to sacrifice generation upon generation in order to test the validity of these competing metaphysical visions and certainties about the trajectory of history.

These dangerous delusions are most damagingly expressed in the expansion of Israeli settlements and by the use of terror by Palestinian extremist groups. Settlements threaten a peace based on two states by strengthening rather than loosening Israel's grip on the occupied territories and greatly complicating the process of creating a Palestinian state. They also profoundly erode Palestinian confidence that Israel is interested in allowing a viable, contiguous state of Palestine to be born. Similarly, attacks by Palestinian groups makes Israelis question whether Palestinians would ever accept Israel and agree to live with it in peace and security.

It is up to both peoples to decide whether they will allow themselves to be driven by extremist agendas, or to pursue what is plainly in their national interests. Their past trespasses against each other, both real and imagined, have to give way to the recognition that Israelis and Palestinians clearly now need exactly the same thing: An end of conflict based on two states.

I do not believe that the conflict should be seen any longer as pitting Israelis against Palestinians, but must be re-conceptualized as a struggle between those who are committed to ending the conflict based on two states against those on both sides who persist in clinging to hostility. Those who are prepared to recognize each other's dignity and self-determination in two sovereign states share a common purpose, and have more in common with each other than with their compatriots who are bent on conflict for generations to come.

News in Brief

Egypt to Reopen Embassy in Iraq

Egypt's Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit on Sunday said Cairo was ready to send a fact-finding delegation to Baghdad to evaluate security conditions for opening an embassy in the Iraqi capital.

"The mission is ready to go (to Baghdad) as soon as the Iraqi authorities inform us that they can receive it and provide it with the adequate climate" to carry out its work, Abul Gheit told reporters, Gulf Daily News said.

It will "examine the situation on the ground," he said at a joint news conference with the visiting Bahraini foreign minister, Sheikh Khaled bin Ahmad Al-Khalifa. "When we set up an embassy in Iraq we want to guarantee that conditions will be favorable and that its security will not be undermined," Abul Gheit added.



Rice Admits Israel Creating Problems



➔ Palestinian security forces patrol the streets in the West Bank city of Nablus.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Sunday urged Israel to take more concrete steps to ease the lives of West Bank Palestinians on her latest trip to the region to boost peace efforts.

She also said Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank is "particularly problematic" for the Middle East peace process.

"We hope to improve the opportunities around the West Bank for people to have economic opportunity in a secure environment," Rice said after meeting Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas in the West Bank political capital of Ramallah.

She told the AFP reporters that the changes should have "a real effect on the lives of people," adding that US mediators were "trying to look not just at quantity but also at the quality of improvements."

On her last visit to the region, Rice secured an Israeli pledge to remove some 50 of the 500-plus roadblocks across the occupied West Bank, but the Palestinians and the United Nations said the move was largely insignificant.

Rice told reporters that improving conditions in the West Bank depended on "responsible actions" by Abbas' Palestinian Authority which she said "are really now taking place".

Rice specifically praised the decision to deploy some 600 Palestinian police reinforcements to the town of Jenin as part of a security crackdown in the north of the territory aimed at building confidence with Israel.

"I think you are going to see improvements in the West Bank and the Israelis will also really have to do their part," she added.

➔ Food Aid Suspended Again

Hours later, the UN relief agency for Palestinian refugees announced it would again suspend food aid distribution in the Gaza Strip from Monday because of a lack of fuel due to the Israeli blockade of the Hamas-run territory.

UNRWA's decision followed the Israeli army's closure of two key crossings with Gaza

through which most of territory is supplied after they came under mortar fire.

The agency previously halted aid distribution for four days last month for the same reasons.

On her 15th visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories in less than two years, Rice said she remained hopeful that the two sides could strike a peace deal by the time Bush leaves office in 2009.



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Abbas told the same press conference that "the negotiations are being carried on every day and every hour."

"Everyone seems serious, and expresses hope that we will arrive at an agreement to establish a Palestinian state this year," he added.

➔ Probe Won't Affect Goals

Olmert has vowed to press ahead with peace talks despite a new corruption probe against him, the fifth such investigation since he formed his government two years ago.

Olmert said Sunday that he would not let a new police investigation into his conduct prevent him from doing his job--his first public comments on a probe that has threatened to

further weaken him politically as he tries to make peace with the Palestinians.

➔ Egypt Slams Secrecy Veil

Egypt's FM Ahmed Abul Gheit, criticized both Israel and the Palestinians for keeping the status of their negotiations under wraps.

"They do not want to reveal the nature of such negotiations, preferring to keep it secret," he said.

Cairo has been leading efforts to secure a ceasefire between Israel and Gaza militants that would see an easing of an Israeli blockade on the Hamas-ruled territory, which has been sidelined in the current peace talks. The foreign ministry in Cairo later clarified that Abul Gheit, in his remarks carried in Qatar's Ash-Sharq, had not reported progress in the talks.

"There should not be a bad interpretation of the situation, to think that there is progress when there is nothing concrete to indicate this," it said in a statement.

➔ Hamas Police Ferry Palestinians

The ruling Hamas party started using police cars on Sunday to ferry Palestinians around the Gaza Strip because of severe fuel shortages.

"Orange stickers reading, "We are ready to drive you for free," were affixed to blue units of the Hamas-run police force.

Israel has restricted fuel supplies to Gaza in an attempt to pressure Palestinian militants to halt their rocket barrages at nearby Israeli communities, AP reported.

Israel defense forces Sunday closed the Karni border crossing and the Nahal Oz fuel terminal with the Gaza Strip after rocket attacks from Palestinian militants.

The spokeswoman of Israel defense forces told Xinhua that five Qassam rockets and one mortar shell were fired on the western Negev early Sunday, with the latter landing near the Nahal Oz fuel terminal.

Some 50 trucks of supplies were forced to turn back after the barrage of shelling, the spokeswoman added.