

## **The Quest for a Just Peace**

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I would not be so presumptuous to assume that in the course of my remarks or in the discussion that follows we will succeed in agreeing on a path to a just peace in the Middle East. I am here because I believe that the quest for peace is the only hope for the region and that peace is the only means for Israel to secure a lasting democracy. Moreover, I believe that the continued occupation of the West Bank is a corrupting influence on the Jewish state and the Jewish people as a whole and the longer it continues the longer the path to peace will be, if indeed it is not too late already. I am also against divestment and many of you may be disappointed to learn that I also believe that it is in the best interest of Israel and the Palestinian Authority as well as the entire region that a high level of US military aid be maintained. Let me explain.

Let me begin with a few optimistic words. Since Obama's recent visit to the region and Kerry's current shuttle diplomacy there are signs that the US is recommitted to encouraging or strongly nudging the parties to change the rhetoric and get back to the negotiating table. Kerry has also mentioned that there is a new possible cooperation on the tourism front "just north of the Dead Sea," which means Jericho and possibly the site associated with John the Baptist. I will suggest that archaeotourism and pilgrim tourism can do much to promote cooperation between Israel and the PA, and Jordan as well (NYT April 9<sup>th</sup>), not to mention the economic benefits. He has also mentioned that other new Palestinian – Israeli initiatives are in the works. The major breakthrough with Turkey has also reopened a door that had been closed for some time. I think all would agree that Turkey is a major player in the politics of the Middle East as the only

Muslim non-Arab nation besides Iran, and an economic and military powerhouse. As a Sunni nation with a history of toleration that goes back to Ottoman times and a principled stand during the Nazi era with respect to absorbing Jewish intellectuals and artists Turkey is well positioned to be a major interlocutor in the peace process—its absence these past several years after the unfortunate Gaza flotilla incident involving the MV Mavi Marmara has largely been responsible for the present impasse. Its engagement with the current Syrian War and role as a place of refuge and supporter of the rebels is also cause to think about a possible reshaping of Syria and the adjoining states after the fall of Assad. As a Sunni nation with a strong secular tradition but also with a moderate form of Islamicization in recent years it could also provide a helpful model to other states in regard to “church-state” relations, i.e., Frist Amendment issues in U.S. terms.

Let me also add the result of recent Israeli elections to this list of possible signs of hope in a place where hope has been sorely lacking for a long while. Netanyahu’s right wing Likud-dominant coalition has been broken and once again the Israeli electorate has offered a surprise. The Lapid party, Yeish Atid, has said that the religious parties can no longer dictate terms that traditionally have allowed orthodox men and women to be free from the draft, a good beginning to allow for a degree of separation of religion and state, one of the pillars of democracy. While the new party of Yeish Atid did not openly campaign for peace the fact that Tzipi Livni has been put in charge of restarting the peace process is also a good sign. And let me add that regular polling in Israel has constantly demonstrated that 65% of the Israeli population wants to return to negotiation and move the peace process forward, while 25% regularly register that they see little chance for success in any peace talks. During times of terrorism and tension these statistics routinely turn upside down but always return to the side of peace.

So, I can say to you with a sense of pragmatic realism that in view of all that has happened these past years and wars, the door to peace has opened just a tad, and that's not nothing.

But now to the aftermath of the so-called Arab Spring and to the forces at work that could allow the Middle East to explode at any moment like a powder keg; and this brings me to suggest a sense of real urgency, reflected especially in America's renewed energy and efforts in the region. Without going into the causes for the turmoil in the Middle East, let us simply take a quick look at the neighborhood in which Israel now finds itself. The new Egypt is in near chaos with the Muslim Brotherhood in charge. Christian Copts were brutally attacked again last week and extreme forms of Islamic law are being forced on the population. Food shortages and unemployment are rampant; tourism is virtually at a standstill; the economy is in shambles; and the Sinai border with Israel is more porous than it has been in a generation and dangerous on both sides of the frontier. As for Egypt's relationship with Hamas and Gaza, the border has not been opened as we might have expected.

In turning to Jordan in the East we note that King Abdullah though he has just installed yet another new government has been the subject of much criticism from varied quarters: the Palestinian community, the Islamic right, and the impoverished. He is not nearly as beloved as was his father, and his wife's over-the-top 40<sup>th</sup> birthday party in the Wadi Ram that cost millions of dollars cast a very bad light on the royal family and their extravagant habits. And Jordan's already shaky economy is sinking further from the influx of more than half a million Syrian refugees. In short, Jordan while a strong ally of the US, once a strong ally of Israel, is no longer the stable kingdom it once was.

To the north full chaos reigns. While several million Syrians have escaped to refugee camps in Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon, millions more are homeless in their own country. More than 70,000 are dead and the end is not yet in sight. In the last several weeks skirmishes have been reported in the Golan between Syrian forces and the IDF. God knows what will happen in Syria and whatever happens is sure to leave major uncertainty regardless of the winner. The government of Syria's major supporters, Russia, China, and Iran represent an array of nations that presents all sorts of problems to Israel and the United States. Iran's support also of Hezbollah and Hamas in Lebanon and in Gaza adds additional danger to an already volatile mix. The Lebanese border with Israel is controlled by Hezbollah who are now fully supplied with missiles capable of reaching Haifa and Tel Aviv not to mention what the Syrian government has within its borders. And any breakdown in the status quo or an errant missile that lands in a heavy populated area in Israel is capable of starting a much larger regional war if not nuclear conflict.

The point in outlining this situation is that in my view there has been no time in the history of the Israel-Palestine conflict that has been so dangerous. Who among these Levantine countries can the US rely on? I think we would have to agree that Israel is the only reliable ally there in terms of balance of power issues, not human rights, and continued military support by the US to Israel is one of the main reasons the place has not blown up already! Israel's superior military power, air force, and nuclear capability and dependence on the US for supplies and cutting edge technology means that a balance of power between Israel and the hostile nations around is one of the main reasons that a new war has not broken out. Remove the aid or remove the promise of support to defend Israel and I believe we invite disaster. If no one has noticed, the US Congress overwhelmingly supports whatever Israel does and would not tolerate any real threat to its welfare by Iran or any other powerful enemy. Call it what you will, it is what it is.

Now to say that Israel has not been a fully cooperative ally in terms of complying with US diplomatic wishes is to state the obvious. Israel has continuously ignored American requests to stop the settlements and to respect the Green Line, which represents the armistice lines of the 1967 War. In a 2007 survey of university students only 35 % of Hebrew University students and 27 % of Ben Gurion University students could draw the original borders of Israel going back to either 1948 or 1967. The vast majority included the settlements and expanded map of Israel reflecting the facts on the ground today. Though President Lyndon Johnson demanded of Israel shortly after the Six Day War to state its view on the status of the occupied territory and how it would manage it, etc., a government report prepared by T. Meron adviser to the Prime Minister, Levi Eshkol, stated clearly that only paramilitary settlements were considered legal and a temporary means to keep the peace without annexation. Israel ultimately used this rubric to justify expansion into all the occupied territories in clear violation of the 4<sup>th</sup> Geneva Convention.

I freely admit that the expansion of the settlements and the emergence of a hegemonic religious Zionism has been a huge impediment to peace. Dividing all the captured lands into a labyrinth of discontinuous islands of settlers and Arabs has made the idea of a Palestinian state seem like an impossible dream. It has also meant that Palestinian residents of those areas have not enjoyed minority rights of any sort. Two wars and two intifadas since 1967 have made relations between the two sibling cultures largely untenable and unmanageable. Each is at the end of their respective rope and there is hardly any contact between them. Even Israeli Palestinians are segregated in separate schools; only 1,500 Israeli school children out of 2 million go to school with Arab children. Israeli schools are basically segregated; even religious youngsters do not interact with most other Israelis. How can Jews and Arabs get along if they have virtually no contact with one another? And how do we stop the cycle of violence that is the

main byproduct of the Occupation and oppression of the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza?

One of the possible organizations that might help, though its track record is not great, is the Quartet: the US, EU, Russia, and the UN. Its three guiding principles: recognition of Israel, renunciation of violence, adherence to all previous diplomatic agreements in exchange for recognition of a Palestinian state, are not a bad framework for discussions. We see how important Russia is in the Syria impasse and Israel's distrust of the UN is well known. But this is at least some common ground for us to tread upon and Tony Blair's continuing involvement as special envoy and his indefatigable dedication to the cause makes him a kind of go-to person. Secretary Kerry is the US's new envoy. Blair's efforts with the Quartet to infuse the Palestinian economy with funding and new projects are well known and he has an office in Jerusalem and was for years based at the American Colony Hotel. The Quartet has done things like establish an incubator for Palestinian businesses and help get the EU to give money to places like Tel Balata in Nablus, which is biblical Schechem. Kerry's trip this week to the PA has also focused on the economy of the West Bank, which he believes if successful, will provide a helpful model to emulate. He is also trying to get Israel involved in making that happen, which is a wise strategy.

I do not believe any of us here today is sufficiently well informed enough to devise a plan for peace. I do believe in the effectiveness of dialogue that is embedded in the mission of the Abrahamic initiative, and in that spirit I offer a few ideas that may help create some common ground. I do not believe that the BDS movement or the efforts to have the US end aid to Israel is in that spirit. I would have thought the US could have stood much stronger against the settlements through the years and apparently they have now given up temporarily on making withdrawal a precondition for the resumption of peace negotiations. I assume that Secretary

Kerry and President Obama know what they are doing and give them credit for these new efforts. As for US aid, I do believe that simply earmarking a small but significant sum of the total aid package, whatever that may be, for humanistic endeavors would be a step in the right direction. The US does this everywhere in the region and all over the world and doing this in Israel to foster better relations between Israelis and Palestinians could make a huge difference. Monies might be earmarked for better healthcare for Palestinian residents of Jerusalem or for a cleaner Jerusalem in all neighborhoods. Just look how municipal services are delivered to Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem and see how prejudice exists. Joint projects in science and humanities or social science between Israelis and Palestinian universities might be funded in order to bring the two communities together. Al Quds University in Jerusalem is a stone's throw away from Hebrew University and yet they have no contact except perhaps at my own archeological institute in Jerusalem, the W. F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research (ASOR) on Saladin St. where Palestinian historians and archaeologists regularly gather together to talk, have seminars, and share bread with Israelis and scholars of all nationalities. And we should not forget the little school children who would benefit from having regular classes with one another and play time. Neve Gordon's school in Beer Sheva though a public one (Hagar) is the kind of thing that could greatly be helped with a small infusion of US Aid. We do it in other countries, why not Israel?

I want to turn now to one way that I think can help bring the two communities closer together, and that is through an inclusive communal archaeology and archaeotourism. First, if each side is hell-bent on denying the legitimacy of the other let alone the legitimacy of each other's land claims, how can any kind of talks succeed? Just look at the City of David web site or the signage in the field: this is the place where David walked, built, gardens, and the prophets of

Israel walked and uttered their timeless truths. There is no trace of any Arab or Islamic presence except on the Temple Mount above where the Noble Sanctuary and El Aqsa mosques are situated and in the slum of Silwan down below. There in the shadow of the Second Temple where Jesus met his fate archaeology has become a pawn of the settler movement and a weapon of displacement. Just imagine if this might have been a joint enterprise that benefitted the Silwanis economically and also raised their self-esteem if the Arab or Islamic presence had been duly acknowledged what a difference it would have made. US Aid or diplomacy could help make this happen not only in Jerusalem but in a place like Sebastiyah, or Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel till 722 BCE. There the Vatican, the EU, the Franciscans and the Bank of Rome are trying to make it come alive with an infusion of funds. In an all Muslim poor village two churches have already been restored and they are trying to get the site in better shape for the tourists that will head there when peace talks start again. Better signage, a more inclusive attitude to cultural heritage, must be a building block of the future.

Let me conclude with a ray of hope from Lod in Israel. There a few years ago, an old khan or rest house of caravansary was found and the Israel Antiquities Authority wanted to excavate it and restore it. Who did they choose to work there: elementary school children from separate Arab and Jewish schools nearby. Did they get along? Indeed. Did they love the work? Indeed. Did the Jewish kids object to digging an Ottoman ruin? Not at all. In fact both groups were so excited by the experience they returned after school often to continue the work with their parents. This is communal archaeology. What can we learn from this? In order for two groups to talk to one another with respect they have to have regular contacts in a situation of relative equality. Respect for one another begins with human interaction. Let's redirect some of the US Aid package to Israel for such endeavors.



Another example of how archaeotourism operates may be found in a new group called “Medji Tours” (Mejdi.net), which conducts tours of Israel and Palestine with two leaders, one Jewish and one Palestinian, with a focus on shared archeological sites and a shared, common heritage, highlighting both cultural narratives. They sponsor both local (domestic) and international tours. And I am proud to say that they build on an idea I have been promoting for many years , namely, that in light of the Palestinian claim that they are indigenous to the Holy Land and take their name from the “Philistines,” and we can reliably say today in light of current scholarship that the early Israelites were Canaanites, that both Palestinians and Israelis/Jews are truly descendants of Abraham and Ishmael, brothers in sisters who have legitimate portions in this land we love so much.