

## Fateful Choices for Israelis and Palestinians (Part II)

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### In-Depth Reports

I come from a country that has been engaged in war for the past two years. I am here to present an Israeli perspective on this confrontation -- a confrontation that will shape the nature of Israel, the Palestinian entity, and both societies in the coming years.

How have we arrived at the status quo? Such a question demands a long-term, historical perspective. Clearly, the Oslo process has not turned out the way its designers had hoped. From the beginning, the process was characterized by differing perceptions and conflicts of interests. When an Israeli speaks of "peace," he means personal safety for himself and his society -- a sense of security wherever he goes. When a Palestinian speaks of "peace," he thinks of freedom, an end to occupation, and an improvement in his standard of living, including employment opportunities, education, and better clothing for his children.

Unfulfilled expectations on both sides have led to growing mutual distrust. Difficult issues that were left to the end, such as territorial disputes, the status of settlements, the refugee problem, and the status of Jerusalem, quickly pushed their way to center stage, as did terrorism. For all the talk about why violence is not viable, it seems that terrorism has, in a sense, worked. The Palestinians never abandoned terror as a potential tool for achieving their goals, and eventually it became a strategic threat to the process itself. The process was conducted only at the political and security levels, as cultural and educational aspects were neglected and the people themselves were left behind.

Finally, at Camp David 2000, Israel made a generous proposal of an all-or-nothing nature. Palestinians such as Professor Nusseibeh would be able to accept such an offer. Yasir Arafat, however, not only rejected it, he opened fire. He used terrorism and failed to stop others from using it, although he could have brought it to an end at several points.

The current confrontation with the Palestinians, which began more than two years ago, has resulted to date in the deaths of 624 Israelis and 1,781 Palestinians, leaving more than 17,000 people injured on both sides. The conflict affects most areas of life in Israel, with substantial implications for political and diplomatic relations, the economy, and social processes. For example:

- It has threatened the personal security of Israeli citizens and the civilian way of life.
- It has threatened to destabilize the moderate regimes in the region and to deteriorate into an existential crisis.
- It has generated broad national agreement within Israel regarding the need to fight terrorism while fostering disagreement about the methods for doing so and heightening the sense of inequality regarding who shoulders the burden of defending the state.
- It has created diplomatic difficulties with European countries and damaged Israel's image in Western public opinion. It has also fueled anti-Semitism in Europe and elsewhere.
- It has put to the test the special relationship between the United States and Israel -- a test that both nations have passed so far.

- It has created an economic crisis in Israel, reflected primarily in statistics indicating falling per capita income, reduced investment, increased unemployment, and heightened uncertainty, all of which combine to threaten economic output and price stability. Moreover, terrorism has caused damage of about 12-14 billion shekels each of the last two years.
- It has delayed attention to social issues in Israel.
- It has widened and deepened the gap between Israel's Arabs and Jews.

Moreover, in spite of Israel's complete withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, there remains a real possibility of regional deterioration with Hizballah attempting to instigate a wide-scale conflict with Israel. Syria is interested in maintaining a lowscale conflict, but the consequent tensions threaten to inflame the entire region. Israel's policy is to maintain normalcy on its northern border. It does so with the help of the international community, which is interested in protecting the agreement attained after Israel's withdrawal.

Aside from these local conflicts, the entire region is affected by the global war against terrorism led by the United States. On the agenda is a possible U.S. attack on Iraq. Iraq participated in all of the wars against Israel from 1948 to the 1991 Persian Gulf War, in which Israel was not a party -- just a target -- and in which Iraq received joyful support from the Palestinians.

With his speech on June 24, 2002, President George W. Bush attempted to change the conflict's basic tenets. Israel accepted the principles formulated in the president's speech in the hope that such a change would occur. U.S. policy leaves Israel considerable room to maneuver in its handling of the conflict.

An unresolved debate exists within Israeli society regarding the country's ultimate objectives in resolving the confrontation with the Palestinians. One approach favors a state with a solid Jewish majority, leading its supporters to favor the division of sovereignty over the area west of the Jordan River so that Israel's area will contain a minimum number of Palestinians. The opposite approach is that Israel should rule over the entire area west of the Jordan River while enabling the Palestinians living there to either exercise some autonomy or fulfill their national aspirations in Jordan. Among the provenance of the first approach -- two states for two peoples -- there exists disagreement between those who want to defeat terrorism completely prior to any diplomatic move, and those who call for unilateral disengagement as an early step, as part of the fight against terrorism and as a political objective.

Demographics also play a crucial role in determining Israel's strategy. Currently, 9.4 million people live between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, including 6.2 million Israelis -- of whom 5.2 million are Jews -- and 3.2 million Palestinians. By the year 2020, 14.8 million people will live in this area -- almost 15 million people -- and only 45 percent of them will be Jewish. This poses a challenge to the future of Israel as a democratic, Jewish state.

In order to continue as both a Jewish and a democratic state, Israel must maintain a solid Jewish majority. Solutions that allow for Arabs to live in Israel without full citizenship are not democratic solutions and not Jewish solutions. With time, they will erode Israel's ability to remain both Jewish and democratic. The state's Jewish majority should be maintained in a democratic and moral way by encouraging immigration to Israel, rejecting any Palestinian right of return to Israel, reducing the number of workers and Palestinians residing illegally in Israel, and encouraging the integration and investment of Israeli Arab citizens in the country's economy and society.

In addition, Israel's Jewish and democratic character will be preserved by determining once and for all the country's borders through an agreement with the Palestinians, if we can reach it, or by taking a unilateral move if such an agreement cannot be reached. In other words, demographics, alongside security, are a leading consideration in ultimate border demarcation.

The confrontation, the demographic process, and the national security challenges are interrelated and force Israel to

act quickly to achieve a drastic reduction in the number of casualties. The return of personal and national security is a prerequisite to an improvement in economic conditions, which will in turn help to solve some important problems. Therefore, Israeli actions that can lead to considerable improvement in the country's security situation must take precedence. Some of these actions include:

- Continuing the fight against terrorism while maintaining Israel's ability to take action in the territories and, at the same time, rapidly constructing a security zone with a solid barrier, official crossing points, and a unified command structure.
- Presenting a diplomatic initiative based on the principles laid out by President Bush in his June 24 speech and reaching a determination regarding Arafat's political role.
- Providing humanitarian and economic assistance to the Palestinian people.

It is my hope that such actions will enable the parties to return to the negotiating table and achieve an agreement. But Israel must consider the likely prospect that the current conflict will not end in the near future and that no political resolution will be reached soon even if the Palestinian leadership changes.

A lot of blood has been spilled over the past two years, and an enormous amount of damage has been inflicted. There is even the potential of further deterioration. Destroyed buildings can be rebuilt; lives cannot. But there is still time to implement measures that can change the path of our current trajectory and prevent the further loss of life. This situation is entirely in our hands, and it is preferable that we make these crucial decisions together rather than separately. This is a wake-up call. (Applause.)

Sari Nusseibeh addressed the conference on this same topic. [Read his remarks. \(templateC07.php?CID=110\)](#) ❖

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