

ANOTHER VIEWPOINT
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DOES ISRAEL REALLY WANT PEACE?

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I have been trying to promote peace between the Palestinians and Israel for over forty years, believing that Israel desires peace and security for its people and a fair agreement with its neighbors. All that time I tried to look at the issues dividing the two parties from the standpoint of each of them in order to reconcile the Palestinian rights and claims with Israel's legitimate right for secure and peaceful existence as a state in the Middle East. I still do, but I am not sure anymore that Israel wants peace on reasonable terms that would satisfy the minimum expectations of the Palestinians. Apparently it wants an agreement that would allow vanquishing the Palestinians claims, appropriate more and more of their land and other resources, and render them devoid of political or economic viability. If Israel truly wants an honorable peace agreement with the Palestinians, it could accomplish it in no time, for the road is open, marked by United Nations (UN) resolutions that enjoy a preponderance of international support. UN Resolution 181 called for a two-state solution. Resolution 194 gave the Palestinian refugees the right to return to their homes or receive compensation. After the 1967 war, Resolutions 242 and 338 provided a solution by calling on Israel to withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza and other territories it occupied in that war in return for a peace settlement. The UN resolutions provided a solution to the conflict over Jerusalem by making the city an international city, open to both Arabs and Israelis. Unfortunately Israel has sidestepped all these resolutions, taking advantage of its military power and advanced technology to destroy the Palestinian society and shatter hopes of the optimists who want peace and security for both people. To be fair, the Palestinians made it difficult for the Israelis to comply with those resolutions, and often they provided Israel

with the excuse for violating them, by reciting their classic NO to every proposal put to them, only to regret it later.

Probably the most serious obstacle Israel has erected against peace is the promotion and creation of Jewish settlements on Arab land in the West Bank and Gaza, and in Jerusalem which Israel has annexed illegally and made it its own. Not only have various Israeli governments permitted and subsidized the settlements, they have planted them in strategic positions, endowed them with abundant land, water, and power, and pampered them with over-bloated military budgets in order to protect them in their illegal incursions into Palestinian territories. The little over 200,000 settlers seem to dictate policy for the majority of Israelis, create "facts on the ground" by changing the framework of the conflict, incur heavy costs on the Israeli economy, and sabotage all attempts to reach a peaceful solution.

The significance of the settlements as a formidable obstacle to peace is not a question of Jews or Israelis residing among Arabs in a Palestinian territory or state. Arabs live in Israel and Jews have lived in Arab countries throughout history, but they did so as citizens of the countries they lived. The Arabs in Israel are citizens of Israel. They participate in the governance of the state and share, though less equally, in its democracy. In contrast, the Israeli settlers in the West Bank and Gaza want to live in Palestine as Israeli citizens. They want extra-territorial rights and privileges. But by doing so, they infringe on the sovereignty of the Palestinian people and deprive them of their land and resources. The settlements, being scattered around the territories, with exclusive fortifications and protection mechanism, tend to fragment the Palestinian territory and infringe on its geographical integrity, thus leading to the destruction of its economic development and viability. Probably the most obstructive feature of the settlements is that the settlers seem convinced that the whole of Palestine belongs to them. If so, it is most likely that they would never stop claiming more land and

infringing on the Palestinians in their own "state" of Palestine. Such a state of affairs is bound to lead to perpetual instability, conflict, and destruction of any hope for peace.

The Palestinians have finally recognized the right of Israel to exist as a state on part of the land of Palestine. They also have accepted Resolutions 242 and 338 as bases for a peace agreement with Israel, upon withdrawal of Israel from the territories it occupied in June 1967. Why has Israel not taken the Palestinians at their word and made peace with them? Israel claims that it must guarantee security for its citizens in their own country, which is a legitimate right. But is it a legitimate right also to guarantee the security of its citizens when they penetrate into other peoples lands and homes illegally? Is it legitimate, especially in a democracy, to allow a tiny minority to endanger the lives of the majority? Is it legitimate or logical to demand or expect the Palestinians to end their resistance to the occupation of their land, while Israeli settlements increase in number and size? It is true that the resistance can and should be non-violent, but that seems like demanding the impossible when the settlers come heavily armed and never hesitate in using their weapons against the local people, while being protected by the Israeli army.

It is now over a hundred years of Arab-Israeli conflict, and more than half a century since Israel has come into being as a state. The gains for Israel have been bewildering, and so have been the losses to the Arabs. However, conflict, insecurity, and loss of life have persisted on both sides. Peace seems as far now as it has ever been, the half-hearted acceptance of the vague Road Map (with 14 reservations) by the government of Israel notwithstanding. It is now evident that the Palestinians have finally become realistic enough to want to settle the conflict peacefully, but it is less evident that Israel is ready or willing to commit itself to a peace agreement that would be reasonable and acceptable to the Palestinians. The Palestinians must secure at least a minimum of what they claim to be rightfully theirs, as defined by the UN resolutions. At a minimum, they

must have a state of their own, be able to choose their leaders, and conclude agreements with other countries as a sovereign people. They must have a share in (not of) Jerusalem, and the Palestinian refugees must receive compensation and an opportunity to resettle in or outside the Middle East region. In this minimal scheme there is no place for Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territory. This, however, does not mean that the settlers have to leave or be evicted. They should have the option to stay and live in peace and prosperity as citizens Palestine, just as the Arabs in Israel are citizens of Israel. If the settlers do not wish to be citizens of Palestine, they have the option of returning to Israel or to the country from which they came. Permanent extra-territoriality has no place in this day and age.

If Israel truly wants peace and security, it must take a stand on the issue of the settlements now, not in the future. Israel must cease its subsidy to the settlements, cease its extraordinary protective measures, and cease military actions that facilitate the appropriation of Arab land and resources to the benefit of the settlers. In addition, while demanding an end to violence, legitimately so, Israel must declare its intention to withdraw fully from the Occupied Territories according to a set schedule. It must begin by withdrawing even before violence ends in order to give the Palestinians some confidence that the promise to withdraw is genuine and in step with the desire and option to make peace. At the same time, Israel must put an end to its excessive use of force and pre-emptive strikes especially against civilians and non-combatants. If Israel wants peace, it must put an end to the demolition of homes, the uprooting of trees, and the destruction of what is left of the already crippled infrastructure. Instead, Israel must find ways to build bridges toward the people who are destined to be its neighbors forever.

If Israel is to succeed in making peace, the Palestinians must carry their share of the responsibility. They should put an end to violence. They should be convinced by now that violence has brought them nothing but disaster and they would be wise to cease their

violent resistance to the occupation, even if they were to do so unilaterally. Israel also must be convinced that the cruel and violent attacks against the Palestinians have failed to ensure security or bring peace any closer. If both Israelis and Palestinians genuinely want peace with each other, why do they not give peace a chance by pursuing non-violent and cooperative means toward each other? The Palestinians can begin by declaring a unilateral cessation of violence against Israel. Israel can begin by cessation of its use of excessive force against its neighbors. But above all, Israel can show its "good" will by revising its policy on settlements, and by putting an end to the idea of extra-territoriality for Israeli settlers in a Palestinian state.

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