



Winner in the Arab Press category:

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What Next ?

Originally published in various Israeli and Palestinian newspapers, September 24, 2001

What can a levelheaded person among us (be he/she Jewish or Arab) see as a future prospect to the escalating bloody events in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict? This is a question all of us (whether we be levelheaded or aspire to be so) must consider patiently and detachedly.

Surely no rational person on the Israeli side expects that this conflict can be resolved by removing the Palestinian people from historic Palestine. Similarly, no sane person on the Palestinian side expects to achieve the desired peace by means of removing the Jewish people from this land. Both peoples exist and, in all likelihood, will continue to do so. Therefore, the struggle between them will continue unless they put a stop to it.

Surely also, on the other hand, no sane person on the Israeli side expects Israel to be able to bring about security and stability by forcefully imposing a settlement on the Palestinian people. But equally and conversely, Israelis are unlikely to cave in and accept solutions forced upon them. Force, therefore, will not produce stability or relatively permanent security, if for no other reason than because force is not a trait that is the permanent property of any one party over the other.

All of this means that when any levelheaded person looks ahead, all he or she can see is either a future full of confrontations and bloodshed, or the logical need for a peaceful, agreed-upon solution.

Some might say: But we have tried the peace process and it has failed (with each side presenting reasons for this failure from its own point of view). They might continue by accusing the other side of deliberately prolonging the confrontations, alleging that it never wanted peace in the first place and concluding that the theory that a peaceful solution to the conflict works is, therefore, not a valid theory, and that peace is not a realistic option.

It is true that the peace process has failed, but it must be asked: Did the theory or merely its implementation fail? Are we the only party that believes in peace? In my opinion, the fault does not lie in the theory: It lies in the form it took and the way in which it was implemented.

Why do I say that the fault does not lie in the theory? From an Israeli point of view, failing to reach a solution gradually places Israel in danger. Sooner or later, Israel will find itself turning either into a racist state - like the apartheid regime that existed in South Africa - that is unable to bring security or peace to its citizens, or a binational that has lost its Jewishness. Both outcomes

represent a strategic problem for Israel and require a preemptive measure to prevent them. Thus, strategically, Israel is in need of a solution.

On the Palestinian side, the dream of a national identity within a political entity can only be realized through the creation of a separate (or independent) national state. Allowing such a goal to slip away, or setting a goal beyond this, will simply push the Palestinians toward a demographic and strategic confrontation with Israelis, the best outcome of which, from their viewpoint, will produce a political framework in which Palestinian national identity will not be the predominant political identity of the state. Thus, a solution is a strategic requirement for the the Palestinians too.

Commonsense, therefore, says that a joint solution for both the Palestinian and Israeli problems - and not for one side alone - involves concluding a definitive peace between the two peoples. The theory that such a solution must be based on the establishment of two neighboring - but separate - states also remains sound for as long as such a solution is practicable, both geographically and demographically. In this context, it is important to point out that time does not stand still, waiting for the people to return to their senses.

But if, in theory, peace is a valid way out, why did we fail in its implementation? Is it because the other side does not believe in peace? Or is it because the other party to the conflict does not behave sanely?

There are certainly a number of different reasons for its failure. But in my opinion, one can identify three fundamental obstacles to a solution. These obstacles, whether directly or indirectly, will also continue to prevent one. Therefore, if peace is to be attained, both peoples must confront these obstacles and take them into account. These obstacles can be described as fixed political positions or deeply-rooted psychological states of mind. The first is Palestinian; the second is Israeli; and the third is common to both.

The first obstacle, from the Palestinian perspective, is the emotionally-fixed delineation by the Palestinian people of the areas occupied in 1967 as the geographic/political space for the establishment of a Palestinian state. As a result, attempts by Israel to reduce this space in one way or another (through procrastination, the confiscation of land, settlement activities, and the like) will surely lead the negotiations to failure.

The second obstacle, from the Israeli perspective, is the adamant rejection by Israel of the "principle of the right of return", or its refusal to accept waves of refugees to its land. Once again the clear conclusion is that the Palestinians'" insistence that Israel allow these refugees to return to their original homes and lands will also lead to failure.

The third obstacle, which is common to both peoples, is Jerusalem. Neither side is ready to give up the city. This means that a solution, if one exists at all, must be designed in a manner in which both parties come to share the city through joint sovereignty. Former U.S. President Bill Clinton'"s suggestions in this regard, during the final days of his presidency, can serve as a basis for such a design.

If the first step in a peace process does not involve a concerted effort by both sides to face these issues head on, there will not be a final step in the process. Transitional political solutions (the policy of stages, plans such as the Mitchell Report, the Tenet recommendations, and so on) will not lead to the sought-after peace.

In my view, the issues I have just pointed out are matters that all rational people among us realize deep down in themselves. They are neither strange nor new, but rather things that everyone already knows.

Can, therefore, the voice of reason, on both sides, be raised to deliver us from this tragic situation? Or will we leave our shared destiny to opportunists - those bent on wanton destruction - and others?

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Originally published in Al-Quds Al-Arabi, AMIN.org, HaAretz - Distributed by Common Ground News Service / Middle East

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* "The Next Step Towards Peace," by Khalil Shikaki. Published in the *Jerusalem Report*, March 1, 2001

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