THE CONTEXT OF ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN "FINAL NEGOTIATIONS"

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Abstract:

This article is both a preliminary attempt to return our attention to the central long-term political issue in the Middle East—the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and President Obama's fast-approaching deadline for the end of "final negotiations" over a final political solution—and, on the other hand, an effort to assess the relevance of the region's current upheaval for prospects of a conclusive peace between Israelis and Palestinians. The article argues that contextual factors have historically been the key determinant of the conflict's course, and suggests that they will continue to serve the same role. It concludes, first, by suggesting that Barak Obama's call for year-long "final negotiations" was probably designed only for political purposes that nonetheless will probably enhance prospects for an eventual two-state solution, but it also speculates that a "youth revolution" in Israel similar to that manifested in Gaza could lead to a peaceful settlement along the same lines.

Keywords: Israel, Palestinian, Barak Obama, Middle East peacemaking, Youth Bulge, Arab world

Resumen:

Este artículo constituye un intento preliminar de retomar la atención sobre el asunto político central de larga duración en Oriente Medio –el conflicto palestino-israelí y el rápido límite de plazo del Presidente Obama para terminar las "negociaciones finales" sobre una solución política- y, por otra parte, un esfuerzo por determinar la relevancia de la agitación regional para la perspectiva de una paz entre israelíes y palestinos. El artículo argumenta que los factores contextuales han sido históricamente determinantes del curso del conflicto y sugiere que continuarán desempeñando el mismo rol. Concluye, primero, al sugerir que la propuesta de Barak Obama de un año de "conversaciones finales" ha sido posiblemente diseñada sólo para fines políticos, pero que, sin embargo permitirá aumentar las probabilidades de una eventual solución basada en dos Estados. Además especula con una "revolución joven" en Israel similar a la manifestada en Gaza que puede llevar a un acuerdo pacífico en las mismas líneas.

Palabras clave: *Israel, Palestina, Barak Obama, proceso de paz en Oriente Medio, mundo árabe, revolución joven.*

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1. Introduction

The political reality of the Arab world began to unravel at the beginning of 2011. The process has not yet played itself out.

Tunisia set the pace with a popular movement that began in the closing weeks of 2010 and culminated in mid-January with the overthrow of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the country's authoritarian president for twenty-three years. This was followed immediately by the mass uprising of Egypt's public against the thirty-year rule of President Hosni Mubarak. The Egyptians chased him from office in only eighteen days. At the same time, the drive for fundamental political change spread to other Arab states whose governments were commonly characterized by aged, corrupt and repressive leaders and whose political systems were uniformly characterized by a lack of effective participation. Spearheaded by the region's suddenly irrepressible youth, the unrest soon spread to Jordan, Bahrein, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Libya and Syria. Very early on—even prior to Tunisia's Ben Ali's political demise—a call to revolt against the established policies of established politicians had galvanized a small group of Palestinian youth in Gaza and gained widespread international support from kindred spirits around the world.[2]

As global attention turned to focus on the strikingly novel events of the Middle East, the world seemed to lose interest in what had previously been the dominant question raised by the pre-2011 search for Middle East peace: what was the probable fate of the Obama Administration's demand that "final negotiations" for a definitive peace settlement be launched, and successfully concluded within one year, by Palestinians and the Israeli Government? This article is both a preliminary effort to return our attention to the central long-term political issue of today's Middle East and an effort to assess the possible relevance of the region's current upheavals to prospects for a final peace between Palestinians and Israelis.

In August, 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and US Special Envoy to the Middle East George Mitchell first announced that direct talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority would resume on September 2. Initially, general reaction was decidedly mixed. On the one hand, Iran and Hamas, as well as other pro-Arab rejectionist factions, promptly condemned the US initiative. Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei capitalized on the end of Ramadan to pronounce the Palestinian cause "the number one issue in the world of Islam" and went on to accuse Washington of trying to disguise Zionist "crimes" by distracting the world with "a peace meeting."[3] Concurrently with the onset of the supposedly final negotiations, Hamas launched a series of violent attacks into Israel proper that threatened fatal damage to any vestigial trace of Israeli willingness to seek a negotiated settlement.

But if Palestinians had their own well-entrenched rejectionist force in Hamas, Israelis seemed to struggle for parity, relying largely on the figure of Avigdor Lieberman, their Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, and his nationalist party, the *Yisrael Beiteinu* ("Israel is Our Home"). The party, which caters to Israel's large Russian immigrant community, is the vehicle that carried Lieberman on his meteoric rise to the highest levels of Israel's political system in the space of a half-decade. Israel's 2009 elections emplaced

[2] Ana Carbajosa: "Gazan Youth Issue Manifesto to Vent Their Anger With All Sides in the Conflict", *The Observer*, 2 January 2011.

[3] "Iran's Khamenei Denounces the Israel-Palestinian Peace Talks", *Space War*, at http://www.spacewar.com/reports/Irans_Khamenei_denounces_Israel-Palestinian_peace.

Yisrael Beiteniu as a partner in a coalition government dominated by more senior politicians such as Likud's Benjamin Natanyahu and Labour's Ehud Barak[4].

Speaking to the United Nations on September 28, Lieberman directly contradicted the earlier comments of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu—who had tried to project a relatively hopeful assessment of the peace talks—when he noted that realizing peace with the Palestinians might "take a few decades" instead of a year.[5] As Netanyahu's office tried to downplay Lieberman's remarks, a BBC diplomatic correspondent went to the heart of the general skepticism regarding Israel's willingness to go along with the Obama Administration's peace initiative by laconically twittering the following: "Netanyahu says speech by Avigdor Lieberman at U.N. not official Israel policy. I thought Liberman was the foreign minister."[6]

At the opposite end of the political spectrum were those powers who either applauded, or, at least, refrained from condemning, the American demarche. Most prominent among these were the members of the so-called "Diplomatic Quartet": the U.N., the European Union, Russia, and the United States. Having been at pains to enlist the support of other members prior to the announcement by Clinton and Mitchell, Washington was rewarded by the enthusiastically positive declaration of the Quartet's other members.[7]

On the other hand, the Arab World, though clearly divided over its approach, was on the whole cautiously supportive of the US-inspired negotiations. Egypt was in the forefront of the Arab cheerleaders, closely followed by Jordan. Syria was fairly clearly ambivalent, not directly challenging the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations but seemingly unimpressed by their significance. By early October, with Palestinian-Israeli diplomacy floundering in the wake of Israel's resumption of settlement construction in occupied territories and the Palestinians' ensuing immediate withdrawal from the "final" negotiating process, the entire diplomatic edifice that the Obama Administration hoped to parlay into a comprehensive peace was threatened by irretrievable collapse. An Afro-Arab Summit Meeting in Libya managed to avoid allowing the Palestinian-Israeli talks to become a contentious issue and backed the Palestinian Authority's decision to withdraw from the negotiations.[8]

The Obama Initiative raised more than the usual number of questions. From what did it spring? What was the real intent behind it? The Christian Science Monitor—that bastion of perceptive commentary on things Middle Eastern—raised these issues and came to some tentative possible answers. In part, suggested the Monitor, the answer might be found in the looming prospect that Israel would resume construction of settlements near the end of September and that the predictable Palestinian reaction might well ensure that peace talks

[4] In mid-January, 2011 Ehud Barak suddenly resigned from the Labour Party, though he remained in Natanyahu's coalition government.
[5] Robert Mackey: "Parsing the Israeli Foreign Minister's U.N. Speech", *New York Times*, 29 September 2010, at http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/09/29/parsing-the-israeli-foreign-ministers-u-n-spe...
[6] *Ibid*.
[7] "Quartet meeting expresses strong support for the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations", 21 September 2010, at http://www.quartetrep.org/quartet/news-entry/quartet-meeting-expresses-strong-support-for-the-resumption-of-israeli/
[8] "Arab Summit Opens With Focus on Palestine", *Khaleej Times Online*, 10 October 2010, at http://www.khaleejtimes.com/DisplayArticle09.asp?xfile=data/middleeast/2010/October/middleeast_October136.xml&section=middleeast

would not "resume for a long, long time."[9] However, the Monitor also suggested that the full explanation might be far more complex, having to do with intra-Arab politics, the need for Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to show that his rule over the West Bank was more important than Hamas' rule over Gaza, and signals of relative moderation on Israel's part, among other factors.[10]

These answers were hardly persuasive, even though partly supported by eminent academics. The basic fact was that the mystery surrounding the timing and specific motives behind the Administration's initiative could not be dispelled by a single article in the Monitor, or any other publication. For those familiar with Washington's approach to foreign policy formulation, it was well within the realm of possibility that both the timing and objectives of the Initiative resulted from an admixture of planning, opportunism, mistakes, and miscalculations.

In any event, for many of us there was little interesting in a post-mortem that concentrated on identifying motives and procedures. The only fact of real importance was that at long last Washington had taken a course that promised to focus on the ultimate issues to be addressed in any settlement: final borders, the final disposition of Palestinian refugees, and the range of questions that would determine day-to-day relations between two sovereign states in the area known as Palestine/Israel. Even more important, was the Obama White House's commitment to a one-year time-table for the completion of negotiations over a definitive settlement.

For far too long, the world has watched and waited, largely passively and in silence, for a definitive peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Since Israel's establishment more than six decades ago the threat of the Palestine issue's catalytic potential to spark a conflagration that may engulf much more than the Middle East has steadily grown. Today the menace to any prospect for a comprehensive political settlement is complicated by Iran's possible drive to produce nuclear weapons, which combines with that state's bitterly proclaimed rejectionist posture on the Middle East peace process and its appeal to rejectionist factions in the Arab World.

Academics share in the generalized quiescence with which the world community has come to react to events in the Middle East. We have become too used to an apparently unending syndrome of political stagnation punctuated by bloody and shameful instances of violence. Even worse, too many of us have become disheartened, overwhelmed by the spectacle of decades during which extremist views and positions have generally prevailed in practice.

The Obama Administration's announcement that final negotiations toward a comprehensive Palestinian-Israeli settlement would be launched in early September 2010 and aim for completion within one year placed us all on notice that the time for passive acceptance of Mideast developments has now ended.

[9] Peter Grier: "Israeli-Palestinian Peace Talks: Why Are They Resuming Now?", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 20 August 2011, at http://www.csmonitor.com/layout/set/print/content/view/print/320894.
[10] *Ibid*.

2. The Centrality of Context to the Palestine Issue

Time and again, history has demonstrated the overwhelming importance of contextual factors as variables in the Palestine issue's unfolding. Put another way, the point is that in itself, the question of whether Arab or Jew—or somehow both—will predominate politically over a few square miles of relatively poor land in the Eastern Mediterranean is unimportant. What has lent vital significance to this essentially boring matter are the implications raised for other issues, secondary questions that frequently have very little relation to the political aspirations, or fears of Arabs and Jews alike.

Thus, the 20th Century was segmented into clear periods that saw the Palestine issue's progression from a minor nuisance in a rather remote area to a major threat to world stability, a status it still retains as the 21st Century enters its second decade. For example, the pre-World War I era was one of rising rivalries and tensions among Europe's Great Powers, a period during which Palestine experienced the slow growth of subdued tensions between Zionist newcomers and the established indigenous communities. World War I and its immediate aftermath witnessed the direct involvement of European Powers (and rivalries) in Palestine and the Arab World in general. The interwar period was chiefly marked by Great Britain's doomed efforts to resolve the overt hostility between Palestinian Arabs (Muslims and Christians) and Zionist Jews. World War II was the principal reality of the next stage, and heralded the emergence of the United States as a major actor in the Palestine drama as well as the overriding importance of War-related considerations to Washington's policy-making on Palestine.[11] The post W.W. II era was, of course, chiefly characterized by the Cold War, a phenomenon that in turn was central to any effort to fathom Middle East politics, especially those related to the Palestine issue. The final decade of the 20th Century came as the Soviet Union collapsed, as did the Cold War.

The contention of this article is that contextual factors will continue to determine the course of the Palestine issue. To the extent that this observation is valid, we can therefore probably expect to find the true significance of the Obama Administration's 2010 Peace Initiative in the interplay between that demarche and key contextual variables. Ultimately, of course, the most important "contextual variable" is the American approach to policy-making on the Palestine issue.

3. The American Context

From the moment it appeared in 1958, just a decade after Israel's founding, Leon Uris' novel, Exodus, crystallized what was then the tone and content of dominant American public opinion on the Palestine problem. The Hollywood production appeared two years later, with its heroic musical theme, capping America's cultural love affair with Israel with the certainty of received wisdom. In those days the general level of American familiarity with the Middle East and its problems was still in its infancy. For the bulk of the American public, the equation was straightforward: Jews had been victimized by Hitler; Jews had no national home of their own, but had received international promises that they could build one; Jews had established the democratic state of Israel in spite of Arab resistance; the Arabs had plenty of land and various states in which to develop their

[11] See Tschirgi, Dan (1983): *The Politics of Indecision: Origins and Implications of American Involvement With the Palestine Problem*, New York, Praeger Publishers.

own future; on balance, therefore, Palestinians should give way gracefully to the Zionists' cultural and political superiority.

Despite the atavistic remnants of a colonialist mentality reflected by the discourse, these interrelated elements of a syllogism contain sufficient truth to provide compelling logic for even more serious thinkers to conclude that American policy should uphold Israel's right to exist. In retrospect, this is precisely why today, more than half a century after Leon Uris' novel, even thoughtful American liberals continue to espouse that same position.

On the other hand, much change has marked the American scene since Exodus defined public attitudes toward the Palestine conflict. The 1967 ("Six Day") War proved to be the single most important turning point in American attitudes toward Israel. With Israel having occupied some 26,500 square miles of what only days previously had been Arab lands belonging to Egypt, Jordan and Syria, the myth of a David-like Israel confronting a rabble of Arab Goliaths became steadily harder to sustain. At the same time it quickly became glaringly evident that Israel's military power was of possible use to the United States. By the early 1970s, Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon had shifted the American perspective on Israel from that of the Jewish state as a "moral burden" to that of a valued "strategic asset." The concrete meaning of this change is evident in the statistics of overall foreign and military aid. From 1948 to 1951, the annual percentage of total US aid to Israel came to less than 1%; from 1952 to 1970, it amounted to less than 2% of the annual total US aid committed around the world; 1971, '72, and '73 saw percentages of total aid place at 7, 4, and 5 percent respectively. Then, following the 1973 October War between Israel and Egypt, the annual percentage of total worldwide aid assigned to Israel skyrocketed to 29%, with the military component coming to a whopping 97%.[12] This altered American outlook helped propel the political fortunes of Menachem Begin's right-wing Likud party, which won Israel's national elections of 1977 and formed the government.

With this, the modern state of Israel began to take shape—with a vengeance. The antecedents for a string of outrages by Israel's authorities against the sensibilities of less fanatically inclined people, most definitely including other Israelis, were well laid. There followed in quick succession such things as: 1) Israel's bloody contribution to Lebanon's civil war, culminating in the massacres at Shabra and Chatila in the early 1980's; 2) The increasing construction of settlements on occupied Arab territory, and, above all, 3) the determined avoidance by Israeli authorities, of any suggestion of their final demands on virtually all significant elements of a definitive final accord with the Palestinian people. A major part of this trend involved the constant downplaying of international opinion as a factor worthy of consideration by Israel's government.

This was the context in which George Bush II rose to prominence in the US in the early 21st Century.

The man came packaged in an ideological bundle, a creation of the neo-conservatives who surrounded him and therefore helped dictate the new president's agenda. By the 1990s, neoconservatives were strongly focused on the possible contribution of Iraq as a convenient venue for the resettlement of Palestinian refugees. Various academic studies floated the idea that the sparsely populated countries of the Arab Gulf region—prominently including Iraq—

[12] Tschirgi, Dan and Tibi, Bassam: "Perspectives on the Gulf Crisis", *Cairo Papers in Social Science*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring 1991), Appendix I, Tables 1 and 2, pp. 53-54.

could relieve the world of coping with this major obstacle to peace between Israel and the Palestinian Authority by absorbing more than a million refugees.[13]

A painstaking analysis of available information regarding the motives that underlay the Bush Administration's decision to go to war against Iraq leads to the following assessment:

> On balance, the evidence appears to point conclusively to Iraq's anticipated assignment to receive massive numbers of Palestinian refugees as the primary unstated motive behind the Bush administration's decision to invade that country in March of 2003.[14]

Although neoconservatives have to this day not admitted the basic connection between their hope of resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the US war against Iraq, the American public effectively repudiated the entire neocon agenda when it elected Barak Obama to the presidency in 2008. Sadly, the neoconservative agenda is not yet dead in the United States, but it is for the moment in a welcome retreat. How that breathing space is used by the Obama Administration will be key to the Middle East's future.

Speaking to an audience in Cairo in June, 2009, President Obama distinguished himself strongly from his predecessors in office: "I'm a Christian, he said, "But my father came from a Kenyan family that includes generations of Muslims. As a boy, I spent several years in Indonesia and heard the call of the azaan at the break of dawn and at the fall of dusk."[15] He went on to promise his administration's commitment to an active search for Palestinian-Israeli peace:

> We cannot impose peace. But privately, many Muslims recognize that Israel will not go away. Likewise, many Israelis recognize the need for a Palestinian state. It is time for us to act on what everyone knows to be true.[16]

Hillary Clinton and George Mitchell announced the administration's peace initiative some fourteen months later.

The crux of the American context affecting the Obama Initiative's chances of success lies in public opinion on the Palestine issue. The days when simplistic outlooks so easily prevailed are long since gone; the post-1967 Israel is the most familiar Jewish state to most

[13] For an in-depth discussion of this point, see Tschirgi, Dan (2007): *Turning Point: The Arab World's Marginalization and International Security After 9/11*, Westport, CT and London, Praeger Security International, pp. 19-26. Two examples of such studies—both produced and published by organizations having close ties to official Washington policy-making circles—are Arzt, Donna E. (1999): *From Refugees to Citizens: Palestinians and the End of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, New York, Council on Foreign Relations Press and Alpher, Joseph and Shikaki, Khalil (1998): *The Palestinian Refugee Problem and the Right of Return*, Paper No. 98-7 Harvard University Program on International Conflict Analysis and Resolution, Cambridge, MA, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs

[14] Tschirgi, *Turning Point, op. cit.*, p. 26.

[15] Full Text of Obama's Speech in Cairo, *Associated Press*,5 June 2009, at http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/31102929/#slice-2

[16] *Ibid*.

Americans today. Fouad Maghrabi, an Arab-American academic specialized in the political impact of public opinion in the US, dates the beginning of this pivotal change in public opinion on the Middle East to 1973.[17] Writing in 1986, Moughrabi noted that his "careful assessment of the abundant survey data on the Middle East" showed that crude descriptions of US public opinion as pro-Israeli and anti-Arab were no longer viable. The reality—in the age of Jimmy Carter and the US boycott of official contact with the PLO—was that:

> ...the official American government position stands at variance with the public mood, for it reflects a minority opinion (roughly 25 percent) whose views coincide with the position of the state of Israel. The US government has, since 1975, refused to deal (except in secrecy) directly with the PLO; it has refused to endorse the right of Palestinians to a state of their own...; and it has consistently opted for closer ties to Israel, even at the expense of American interests in the Arab world.[18]

Among the conclusions reached by Moughrabi's study, the following stand out today—at a distance of nearly a quarter century:

> --There is solid support among the American public for the idea of an independent state for the Palestinian people....Such a state is linked to a peaceful settlement of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians and is not perceived as posing a threat to the security of the state of Israel.
> --The public perceives a legitimate Palestinian grievance, the need for a homeland or an independent state.
> --The public still perceives the PLO and Chairman Yasir Arafat negatively. The PLO is not seen as representative of the Palestinians, and most Americans do not think the U.S. should formally recognize the organization. Nevertheless, the majority of Americans think the PLO should be included in peace negotiations along with the other parties.
> --The majority of the public thinks that U.S. aid (military and economic) to the region (including Israel) is excessive and would favor legislation to reduce it.
> --A significant majority of the public, knowing that the U.S. favors Israel in the Middle East, nonetheless thinks U.S. policy should be neutral or evenhanded. Six out of ten Americans prefer that the U.S. government not favor one side over the other.
> --From 1978 on, Israel has not been perceived as seriously trying to achieve a peaceful settlement of the conflict. By contrast, most Arab leaders (Hussein, Mubarak, Fahd, but not Arafat) have been perceived as actively seeking a settlement. Israel is seen as intransigent on the crucial issue of exchanging territory for peace.
> --...the evidence suggests that if an American president were to suggest an approach to resolving the conflict based on an international consensus, he would certainly find ample support among the American people.[19]

[17] Moughrabi, Fouad: "American Public Opinion and the Palestine Question" *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Winter 1986), pp. 56.
[18] *Ibid*, p. 57.
[19] *Ibid*, pp. 74-75.

Perhaps President Obama now hopes to test this final hypothesis. If so, he may have accurately gauged the true state of American public opinion. Alvin Richman, retired from the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Information Agency as an analyst of American and foreign public opinion, and currently a private public opinion analyst and consultant, recently produced a paper entitled "Attitude Factors in the Search for Israeli-Palestinian Peace: A Comprehensive Review of Recent Polls."[20] Richman's meticulous analysis of the subject tends to reinforce the case for Obama's sagacity in the US political arena.

While a significant majority of Americans retain their traditional favoritism toward Israel rather than the Palestinians (63% to 15%), a significant majority of "Americans prefer that the U.S. not take sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."[21] When the question was asked by World Public Opinion.org "which side the U.S. should take in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a majority of respondents said the U.S. should *not take either side* (71%), compared to 21% who wanted the U.S. to *take Israel's side* and 3 percent *take the Palestinians' side*."[22]

On the other hand, it is important to note that since 1994, Gallup Polls "have consistently shown that Americans predominantly favor 'the establishment of an independent Palestinian state on the West Bank and the Gaza strip.' In its most recent survey of this issue (5/29-31/09) Gallup found a 51-29 percent margin in favor of establishing an independent Palestinian state."[23] This is consistent with earlier studies of U.S. public opinion on the conflict. Polls conducted by the U.S.-based Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) going back to 2001 found that a solid majority (77%) of Americans favored President Bush's support of a Palestinian state. [24] Two years later, PIPA polls further found that a solid majority of Americans (60%) supported idea of "putting greater pressure on both Israel and the Palestinians to reduce their level of conflict."[25] Moreover, earlier polls clearly established two further major aspects of American public opinion. The first was the 2003 Gallup finding that Americans overwhelmingly (87%) saw the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as an "important goal" for U.S. foreign policy.[26] The second significant finding of public opinion polls taken in 2002 (PIPA as well as a poll conducted the same year by Investor's Business Daily and the Christian Science Monitor) related specifically to a key issue in the presently scheduled negotiations between the parties, the issue of Israeli settlements in Palestinian occupied territories. Both surveys established that "a modest majority" believed that Israel should not construct settlements in the West Bank and Gaza.[27]

The American political system includes what Theodore Roosevelt once termed the "bully pulpit," the office of the presidency's power to appeal for, and to manufacture, public support. This was precisely the weapon used by Dwight D. Eisenhower to force Israel's reluctant withdrawal from Sinai after the 1956 War with Egypt. It was also the weapon that

[20] Richman, Alvin: "Attitude Factors in the Search for Israeli-Palestinian Peace: A Comprehensive Review of Recent Polls", *World Public Opinion.Org*, 2 September 2010 at http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brmiddleeastnafricara/666.php
[21] *Ibid*, p. 10.
[22] *Ibid*.
[23] *Ibid.*
[24] Israel and the Palestinians, Support for a Palestinian State", at http://www.americans-world.org/digest/regional issues/IsraelPalestinians/pressure.cfm.
[25] "Israel and the Palestinians, Support for Pressuring Parties", at http://www.americans-world.org/digest/regional issues/IsraelPalestinians/pressure.cfm.
[26] "Israel and the Palestinians, Importance of the Middle East to the US", at http://www.americans-world.org/digest/regional issues/IsraelPalestinians/pressure.cfm.
[27] "Israel and the Palestinians, Attitudes Toward Israeli Settlements," at http://www.americans-world.org/digest/regional issues/IsraelPalestinians/pressure.cfm

Jimmy Carter declined to employ—much to the distress of National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski—when he clashed directly with Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan in 1977 over plans for a general peace conference in Geneva. Brzezinski was present, along with Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Israeli Ambassador Simcha Dinitz, in the New York hotel room where the mini-drama unfolded. He recalls it in these words:

> …Dayan in effect blackmailed the President by saying that unless he had assurances that we would oppose an independent West Bank and that we would give [Israel] economic and military aid, he would have to indicate our unwillingness in his public comments here in the United States….Both men were aware of the psychological value of threatening a confrontation. At one instance, Dayan said. 'We need to have some agreed formula, but I can go to Israel and to the American Jews. I have to say there is an agreement and not a confrontation.' To which the President replied, 'We might have a confrontation unless you are willing to cooperate. But a confrontation would be very damaging to Israel and to the support of the American public to Israel
> ….In the end, we got a compromise statement, which pledges the Israelis to go to Geneva….In some instances and on some issues, [Carter] was quite tough; but he didn't go far enough, in my judgment, to indicate that if challenged he would go to the country and there would be an all-out confrontation.[28]

Writing in 1944, a time when the American Zionist leader Abba Hilel Silver had just come close to causing a direct confrontation with the second President Roosevelt, the moderate Zionist leader, Dr. Nahum Goldmann, warned his colleagues in stark words:

> Antagonizing the President of the United States is a serious matter….The policies of the Zionist Emergency Committee during the last month were contrary to Zionist policies as conceived and carried out during the last twenty years….If this fight against the President and this policy of attacking the Administration is continued it will lead us—and I choose my words very carefully—to complete political disaster.[29]

On balance, the evidence appears to suggest that the contextual element of the United States as a factor in the development of the Palestine issue is now definitely tending to be supportive of a policy that aims at promoting a peaceful political settlement. If President Obama hopes to use his position to push effectively for a successful conclusion to Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations, he must be prepared to use his bully pulpit immediately, for the contextual moment of opportunity afforded by Egypt's January Revolution will probably not last long.

[28] Brzezinski, Zbigniew (1983): *Power and Principle: Memoires of a National Security Adviser*, New York, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, pp. 108-09.
[29] Cited in Schechtman, Joseph B. (1966): *The United States and the Jewish State Movement*, New York, Herzl Press, p. 83.

4. The Arab World, Palestinians and Israelis as Contextual Factors

Despite the great variety among them, the states of the Arab world share some key features. For one thing, they are all "authoritarian" political systems, albeit ones that sometimes are amazingly creative in exploring the boundaries of that categorization. By the end of 2010, the Arab World seemed to be caught in an enduring net of "stability," something that critics more accurately described as "stagnation." It was a thoroughly deceptive situation.

The picture began to change suddenly in January, with Tunisia's so-called "Jasmine Revolution." That event, which led to the collapse of the 23-year rule of the country's authoritarian president, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali led to the collapse of Hosni Mubarak's thirty-year regime in Egypt. Analysts had warned for years that the Mubarak regime was engaged in a race between economic/political development and political catastrophe. In late January, the race culminated with victory going to political catastrophe. The outcome was the end result of the gross corruption with which the Mubarak government was associated, the regime's unrelenting oppression of the common citizenry, and its total disregard for the interests of the Egyptian people. The result was the truly spontaneous and popular uprising that swept the country within the space of a few days. At the same time, events in Egypt and Tunisia resonated strongly in Yemen, where the authoritarian leader Ali Abdullah Saleh faced public challenges along the lines of those that had confronted Ben Ali and Mubarak. During the same month, Jordan was wracked by public upheavals generated by deteriorating economic conditions that caused the government to fall, while Lebanon's government suffered the same fate as Hizballah withdrew its support in reaction to the UN tribunal's work on the 2005 murder of Rafik Hariri. By February, the contagion had spread to Bahrain and Libya as well.

In short, in the brief period of about three months, from Christmas to the end of March, the Middle East's contextual reality changed utterly. What had been a region marked by an uneasy, but real and seemingly enduring, stability was rocked by spontaneous, popular and largely politically effective movements essentially demanding a new socio-political environment. What was immediately lost in the situation was the region's predictability.

Because of its importance as a regional actor, Egypt's shift immediately caused waves of concern in the West. Having assumed the role of the Mubarak regime's principal international sponsor, the United States inevitably led the dominant reaction. After some brief initial uncertainty, the Obama Administration, while promising to work for reform measures meeting the protestors' demands, cast its official support to an arrangement that would permit Mubarak to serve out his term of office (that is, until September, 2011) but strip him of virtually all presidential power. In effect, this left the newly-appointed Vice President, Omar Suleiman and the new Prime Minister, Ahmed Shafiq, in control of Egypt's government. On February 11, Mubarak resigned. Within a few short weeks, both Suleiman—who ceased to be Vice President upon Mubarak's resignation from the presidency— and Shafiq followed suit.

Political scientist Robert Springborg was among the first to identify the true import of the US reaction to Egypt's January Revolution. In an online posting dated February 2 entitled "Game Over: The Chance for Democracy in Egypt is Lost," Springborg summed up his overall conclusion in this way:

> The Obama administration…can be expected to redouble its already bad gamble….it will lean on the Europeans, the Saudis

> and others to come to Egypt's aid. The final nail will be driven into the coffin of the failed democratic transition in Egypt. It will be back to business as usual with a repressive U.S.-backed military regime, only now the opposition will be much more radical and probably yet more Islamist. The historic opportunity to have a democratic Egypt led by those with whom the U.S., Europe, and even Israel could do business with will have been lost, maybe forever.[30]

If Springborg's gloomy forecast for the Middle East's political climate is to be avoided, it will be necessary for the United States to ensure that Egypt's post-Mubarak government undertakes clear, visible and effective steps to secure Egypt's transformation to a democracy. Among other things, these must be marked by an inclusionary approach to the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite Washington's deep fear of Islamic fundamentalist militancy, this last step will be absolutely necessary if the horrid future sketched out by Springborg is not to be Egypt's fate. The course of Egypt's political future is likely to be set in early fall, when in accordance with a national referendum held in March, parliamentary elections are to be held, followed by presidential elections—probably in October or November.

On the other hand, it is very doubtful that within a democratic context the Muslim Brotherhood would come to power in Egypt. Estimates are rough and ready, but most observers place the Brotherhood's likely weight at about 20%-30% of the voting public.[31] At the same time, however, the benefits of achieving a successful process of Egyptian democratization would be of truly historic proportions and, incidentally, almost certainly help promote Palestinian-Israeli peace.

As things now stand, there are at least three chronic and interrelated sources of tension running through contemporary Arab societies, each of which relates to the overriding issue of "development" while simultaneously militating against the successful conclusion of a Palestinian-Israeli peace.

The first is the strain generated by the clash between secularism and Islam as guiding worldviews. In reaction to a modernization process that was largely without direction, Arabs proved susceptible to extremist religious outlooks. Second, is the thoroughgoing strain generated by the requirements of progressive institutionalization and the opposed pull of traditional methods of problem-solving. Finally, there is the major strain produced by the clash of rising demands for true democratic participation and established patterns of authoritarian rule. At bottom, the central question is an existential one, and Arabs are learning that in the absence of a firm sense of personal identity, the demands of social existence are apt to seem overwhelming.

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[30] Springborg, Robert: "Game Over: The Chance for Democracy in Egypt is Lost", *The Middle East Channel*, at: http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/02/02/game_over_the_chance_for_democracy_

[31] Estimates vary but something between 20% and 30% is the most common. See Baskin, Gershon: "Encountering Peace: The roots of democracy on the Nile", *Jerusalem Post*, 7 February 2011. See also, Wickham, Carrie Rosefsky: "The Muslim Brotherhood After Mubarak", *Foreign Affairs* 3 February 2011, at http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67348/carrie-rosefsky-wickham/the-muslim-brotherhood-after-mubarak

The desire for "development" in ways that are authentic yet also culturally sound is the crux of the current Arab dilemma. It plays itself out socially, economically and politically, and as yet has exhausted neither its possibilities for success nor the amount of frustration it can generate. Still, despite the range of mysteries surrounding the very concept of "development," there is at least one area in which something of its nature as a social phenomenon has been clarified. Demography seems to indicate that population fluctuations have a roughly predictable pattern, or rhythm. It follows that this, in turn, exerts an identifiable impact on factors affecting social, economic and political "development." This insight underlies the notion of a *demographic window of opportunity (DWO).*

The United Nations has been the seat of the most energetic effort to inject substance into the concept of DWO. Of particular concern to the UN's Population Division is the Arab world, which in comparison to "other regions has been experiencing one of the fastest population growth rates...."[32] With an overall population growth rate exceeding 2% per year, the future appears to hold promise as well as peril for the region. Various alterations in patterns of social behavior over the past decades—including more and more effective health care, more extended education, increases in the age of marriage, and more effective use of contraceptive measures—have helped nudge the Arab world toward a transition to "a low fertility and mortality regime [which] is expected to provide a substantial demographic dividend during which the cohorts in productive age groups will exceed those in need of support (i.e. children and elderly)."[33] Put another way, the demographic window is:

> A period during which societies experience demographic changes that bring about important changes in the age structure of the population, whereby the proportion of the working age population exceeds that of other groups. The emergence of the demographic window can be determined by the period of time during which the ratio of the age group 0-15 falls below 30 per cent while the ratio of those aged 65+ remains below 15 per cent.[34]

The developmental *dividend* provided by the demographic window of opportunity "does not last forever," nor is it "automatic." In short, goes the argument of UN demographers, "some countries take better advantage [of the window] than others."[35] Direct linkages between the demographic window and development lie in the effect of demographic transitions on three interrelated areas: labor supply, the temporary growth of which frees resources for investment

[32] "Arab World Experiences Rapid Population Explosion" (Interview with Patrick Garland, demographer at the United Nations Population Division), *World Focus*, 23 March 2010, at http://worldfocus.org/blog/2010/03/23/arab-world-experiences-rapid-population-explosion

[33] *Ibid.*

[34] *International Migration and Development in the Arab Region: Challenges and Opportunities* United Nations, Population and Development Report, Third Issue, Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), New York, United Nations, p. 16, n. 46, at www.escwa.un.org/information/publications/edit/upload/sdd-07-2.pdf

[35] Khalifa, Atef M.: "Youth Bulge and the Demographic Window of Opportunity in the Arab World", Expert Group Meeting on Moving the Development Agenda Forward: Opportunities and Potential Gains, United Nations Economic and Social Council, Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), Beirut, 5-6 November 2009, p. 5, at cpbinternational.ning.com/xn/detail/2574812:Topic:6017?xg

in "economic development and family well- being"; enlargement of the working-age cohort, which boosts savings and, therefore investment as well; and, finally, enduring "changes in the way people live [which produce] gradual deep-rooted changes in cultures' prevailing norms and values."[36]

Although the onset and termination of demographic windows of opportunity cannot be precisely dated, UN projections do serve to provide important, and possibly alarming, indicators. According to a late 2009 study prepared for the Economic and Social Commission for West Asia, "seven Arab countries have already started a demographic window which is expected to continue through 2025 and 2040."[37] Moreover, most of the rest of the Arab countries are projected to experience a similar demographic transition before 2030, with the decade 2020-2030 being crucial for Jordan, Syria and Egypt. The extent to which the governments of these countries are prepared to confront the challenge of national development rather than expend resources on the Palestine conflict will be a key factor affecting their response to the Obama administration's current peace initiative. In theory, at least, it is one that should enhance the region's receptivity to the prospect of definitive peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians at this time.

In a sense, the Palestinians and Israelis are the most important "contextual factors" that will determine the outcome of Obama's peace initiative, for they are, after all, the two primary protagonists in the Palestine issue. However, in another sense—one taking into account the history of the problem's evolution—the opposite is the case. Whether one looks at the Palestine issue's development during the mandatory period or at any period since Israel's creation, a clear pattern is visible: the dominant posture of Arabs and Jews alike is mutable. Both sides have established their political goals through processes that pitted those favoring "maximalist" objectives against those supporting "optimizing" goals.[38] The world has developed a terminology to describe this sort of political pattern. "Maximalists" are known as extremists; "optimizers" are called moderates.

The same dynamic grinds on, and though the identities of extremists as well as moderates have changed, the tensions between them remain the same. In Palestinian politics the extremist banner is carried by Hamas, while Fatah now upholds the moderate position. Israel's vibrant democratic system precludes any simple comparison, but it can be said in general that parties of the right, and particularly those whose ideologies are religiously-based, represent the extremist view while the traditional left is the voice of moderation.

A closer look at Palestinian and Israeli public opinion reveals intriguing signs that Obama's initiative may find a fertile context in Palestinian and Israeli attitudes. Alvin Richman's review of attitudinal factors in the current search for Israeli-Palestinian peace is telling. Comprising an analysis of Israeli and Palestinian opinions revealed by four types of surveys conducted in 2009 and 2010, Richman's work rests on 1) polls conducted simultaneously in Israel and the Palestinian territories, 2) the products of survey firms based in Israel, 3) the products of similar firms based in the Palestinian territories, and 4) the products of survey firms based in the United States.[39]

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[36] *Ibid*.
[37] *Ibid*.
[38] Tschirgi, Dan (1989): *The American Search for Mideast Peace*, New York, Westport, CT, London, Praeger, pp. 221-36.
[39] Richman, *op. cit*., pp. 2-3.

An overall summary of Richman's findings reveals that both "the Israeli and Palestinian publics want to reach a peace agreement, but both sides deeply distrust the other....Negotiators on both sides also are constrained by extremists opposed to major Israeli-Palestinian compromises...."[40]

Evidently, the bulk of Palestinians as well as Israelis sense the vital role of contextual factors in promoting a peaceful settlement. For "both Israelis and Palestinians mainly favor a *stronger* U.S. role in the peace process, because the U.S. is seen as a key to reaching an agreement, even though each side perceives the U.S. as partial to the other."[41] At the same time, this comprehensive review of 2009-10 public opinion polls reveals that obtaining a full settlement will encounter very serious obstacles, the chief one being achieving agreement on the question of Jerusalem, whose degree of contentiousness outranks such critical issues as borders, Israeli settlements in occupied Arab territories, the future of Holy Sites, security arrangements and the future of Palestinian refugees.[42] The split between Hamas and Fatah clearly preoccupies Palestinians, but polls show that Fatah remains "more popular than Hamas." However, when asked to identify their political preference, a greater number of Palestinians "identified themselves as independent or did not answer."[43]

The most startling revelation in Richman's study was in relation to Israeli public opinion on the issue of "dismantling most settlements" as part of a peace agreement with Palestinians. Contrary to the widespread impression that most of the Israeli public would oppose such a concession, the reality is that "most of the Israeli public" supports the measure.[44] Richman notes that "of greater political weight is the fact that many Israelis mistakenly believe that most of the Israeli public sides with the settlers in opposing settlement evacuation as part of a peace agreement."[45] He goes on to make a very pertinent comment: "Whether or not this broad misperception is produced by the relatively vocal settler movement or the relative passivity of its opposition, it can be argued that it is much more effective politically in Israel than the public's true preferences...."[46]

5. Conclusion: Smoke and Mirrors; What if the Initiative Fails?

The foregoing analysis has been predicated on the argument that contextual realities have served as the essential guiding elements in the trajectory of the Palestinian-Israeli struggle. My conclusion, of course, must proceed within the same parameters. However, one should keep in mind Manuell Castells' observation that a key feature of contemporary life is "the sudden acceleration of the historical tempo."[47] Nowhere has this been made more evident than in the recent history of the Middle East. Consequently, the nature, substance, and essence of the "context" of politics have altered fundamentally, and this is a reality that must be taken into account.

[40] *Ibid*, p. 1.
[41] *Ibid*. Original emphasis.
[42] *Ibid*.
[43] 35% of Palestinians described themselves as supporters of Fatah, 19% claimed to support Hamas, 39% identified themselves as "independent or did not answer." Ibid, p. 6.
[44] *Ibid*, p. 7.
[45] *Ibid*.
[46] *Ibid*.
[47] Castells, Manuel (1997): *The Power of Identity*, Malden, MA, Blackwell Publishers, pp. 68-69.

Predicting developments in the Middle East is something like the chances that a drunk in a carnival Fun House can successfully walk a straight line despite the distractions of smoke, mirrors and all sorts of other misdirecting influences. The prospects of success are pretty nearly equally dismal.

Still, there seem to be a few firm things to hold on to in attempting an analysis of the Obama Initiative. These are the following:

1. *Middle East Politics is the Land of Illusion*: Because of the dynamics of the conflict—which historically have failed to establish credible limits to the rival ambitions of the two main progagonists—political logic has attached itself to sponsors of extremist postures on all sides. In such a setting, misperception (that is, "illusion") is consciously fostered by virtually everyone, except, of course, moderates.

2. *Obama May Be the Illusionists' Illusionist:* The one element in Obama's Initiative that seemed disingenuous, to say the least, was its one-year deadline for successfully concluding a peace agreement between Palestinians and Israelis. It would seem to follow that the deadline should not be taken seriously. If this is true, the question is "what purpose would an illusory deadline have served?"

   One can speculate that a politically-motivated deadline could have been inspired by a desire to move the United States toward an updated and far more specific statement of what it would consider to be in its national interest as a Palestinian-Israeli settlement.[48] On the other hand, it may have been a means to test the amount of support that the administration could expect from Jewish voters in the United States.[49] In this case, Obama may be planning a direct and vociferous confrontation with Israel's expansionist government—counting on sufficient international and domestic support to allow the White House to prevail. On the proverbial "third hand," the one-year deadline might have been seen as a period during which the U.S. could "test" 'understandings' it had with foreign powers, particularly with Russia. [50] Finally, of course, none of

[48] To date the closest the United States has yet come to such an indication is the ill-fated "Rogers Plan" of 1969-70, named for Richard Nixon's first Secretary of State, William Rogers.

[49] Were this the case, the administration would have been heartened after the Republicans scored an impressive victory in the November, 2010 midterm Congressional elections. J Street, a political group billing itself as the "political home for pro-Israel, pro-Peace Americans," commissioned a series of surveys to determine the nature of the Jewish vote in the elections. These resulted in a clear claim by J Street that "Jewish Voters Bucked National Trends," nationally voting for Democratic candidates by a majority of 66%. See Spitalnick, Amy *J Street Blog*, 3 November 2010 2:10 pm, http://www.jstreet.org/blog/?p=1313

[50] It is interesting to note that 2010 saw Russia launch several initiatives in the Arab World, particularly in regard to Syria. In May, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev arrived in Damascus for a two-day visit, accompanied by a high level delegation that included the chiefs of the Russian warplane manufacturer, Irkut, the government's Rosoboronexport, and Federal Agency for Military Cooperation. In August, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad met Medvedev at Russia's Black Sea resort of Sochi. Russia and Syria were reportedly preparing to announce deals on various arms transfers to Syria. In September, despite protests from Israel and the United States, Russian Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov confirmed that Russia would fulfill a contract, originally signed in 2007, for approximately 800 cruise missiles purchased by Syria. A month later, the United States announced it was considering the sale to Saudi Arabia of an arms package that would come to some $60 billion. It does not seem inconceivable that this flurry of super-power arms commitments to the Middle East is connected to the

> these possibilities are mutually exclusive, and therefore they all might figure into calculations that led the Obama administration to opt for a one-year deadline.

In any case, my final prediction in this hall of smoke and mirrors is that regardless of what actually occurs, Obama's peace initiative will have further crystallized, and therefore helped strengthen, the trajectory toward a two-state solution in Palestine.

Conclusions of this sort are flatly unsatisfying, capable only of extrapolating from existing circumstances to suggest more or less reasonable projections of probable futures. Much more venturesome speculation may well be in order under the present conditions of the Middle East's political life. For example, in very late 2010—well before the Tunisian revolt terminated Ben Ali's long rule and weeks before the Egyptian revolution even began—a tiny group of university students in Hamas-dominated Gaza was driven by sheer frustration to issue an explosive "Manifesto for Change" on Facebook. Within days, the document resounded around the world, and in the process "gained thousands of supporters" for the kids who produced it.[51]

Making full use of their generation's penchant for eloquent bluntness, the Manifesto's authors—reportedly three women and five men—launched their tirade with a series of sentences that ensured them the attention of their elders on all sides: "Fuck Hamas. Fuck Israel. Fuck Fatah. Fuck UN. Fuck UNWRA. Fuck USA!"[52] They then proceeded to enumerate the major sources of frustration, fear, and anger in their daily lives as Palestinians and Gazans, concluding with the following plaint:

> We do not want to hate, we do not want to feel all of this feelings, we do not want to be victims anymore. ENOUGH! Enough pain, enough tears, enough suffering, enough control, limitations, unjust justifications, terror, torture, excuses, bombings, sleepless nights, dead civilians, black memories, bleak future, heart aching present, disturbed politics, fanatic politicians, religious bullshit, enough incarceration! WE SAY STOP! This is not the future we want!
> We want three things. We want to be free. We want to be able to live a normal life. We want peace. Is that too much to ask? We are a peace movement….[53]

Obama Administration's peace initiative. One might speculate that the Administration signaled its willingness to countenance a renewed Russian interest in providing arms to Syria in return for Moscow's support of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and acquiescence in the US-Saudi arms deal. However, there is no concrete evidence at this time in support of such an interpretation.

[51] "Gazan Youth Issue Manifesto", *op. cit*.

[52] "Gaza's Youth Manifesto for Change", at *news.infoshop.org/article.php?story=20110101034047142*

[53] *Ibid*. The liberal commentator and pundit Edward Teller raised a basic question about the genuineness of the Manifesto. Reviewing possible evidence, particularly that related to possible links between the Manifesto's authors and the *Sharek Youth Forum*—an organization with ties to Washington's National Endowment for

The basic accusation—that the elder generations' policies on all sides have direct responsibility for the current impasse and that the youth on all sides must pay the price—is irrefutably true. There may be hope to be found in the current spate of Middle Eastern upheavals, if it extends itself to include an Israeli counterpart to Gaza's budding youth movement.

Failing that, the dismal political dynamics of the Middle East will probably have to grind on, slowly inching toward the two-state solution that is now the most rational option and the one that probably will eventually be reached, but at a cost that might have been avoided had the kids' views been taken seriously.[54]

Democracy, itself an institution may have replaced the CIA as a manipulator or political currents in the Middle East, Teller concluded that he perceived the new youth group "as possibly genuine, though probably not." However, he went on to offer his final judgment on the Manifesto: "Whatever the true origins of this seemingly spontaneous manifesto…it is [to] the young people involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that we must look toward for any hope there."

[54] As of this writing (late March, 2011) for example, the current course of Middle East peacemaking is marked by yet another in the very long series of tragedies that are ultimately traceable to the deeply psychological personal and professional agendas of "leaders" on all of the many sides in the search for Palestinian-Israeli peace. In February, the UN Security Council sought to condemn Israel for its expansionist policies on Jewish settlements in occupied Arab territories. The move was blocked, after winning the support of all other Council member, by a US veto, the first cast by the Obama Administration. Some days later, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu telephoned German Chancellor Angela Merkel to complain about her country's favorable vote on the proposed resolution to condemn Israel's expansionist policies on settlement construction. According to press reports, the German Chancellor roundly rebuked Israel's prime minister for not having "made a single step" toward peacemaking. These events formed the backdrop to what happened a few days later: at least one, and possibly more, intruders entered a Jewish settlement near the West Bank town of Nablus and murdered five members of a sleeping Jewish family slitting the throats of all, including a months-old infant. Israel's direct response came within twenty-four hours. It was announced that authorization had been given for the construction of hundreds of additional homes for settlers in the occupied territories.
The obscene cycle of provocative tit-for-tat seems determined to thrive in the Middle East.