

Personal Empowerment as the Missing Ingredient for a Resolution of the Israel/Palestine Conflict

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Israel declared a war against terrorism in November 2001 apparently joining the US in a global effort to eradicate terrorism. Israel's Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, declared the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) an organization that gives aid and succor to terrorists, and further declared in March 2002 that its leader, Yasser Arafat, was an enemy of Israel. If Yasser Arafat were sincere in forging a peace agreement with Israel, he would, according to Sharon, curb the terrorists. By not curbing the terrorists, PNA was complicit in the terrorist campaign of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Four key questions that arise are: Is Arafat really a sponsor of terrorism? Is Israel's war against terrorism legitimate? Are Israel and the PNA really committed the Oslo Peace Accords? And finally, is there a solution to the current violence?

To answer these questions, I want to review some of the main developments since the Oslo Peace Accord of 1993. Negotiated by then Prime Minister Yitshak Shamir and Yasser Arafat, the agreement called for a number of staged Israeli withdrawals from the Occupied Territories. At the end of the initial 5-year period, Israel and the PNA would negotiate a final solution over the most thorny issues, Israeli settlements, right of return, and Jerusalem. Under the Rabin and Peres Labor administrations, Israel did complete the first sequence of withdrawals, allowing the PNA to take control of most Palestinian-occupied cities.

It's important to point out here that in accepting the Oslo Accords, Arafat showed enormous courage and leadership. He was willing to go along with an agreement that envisioned a Palestinian state emerging from a patchwork of self-governing territories. This was a far cry from the PLO position of a return of all the occupied territories before recognizing the state of Israel. Arafat, in fact, had accepted something that very few nationalist leaders in similar conflicts would have dared accepted.

The subsequent Likud administration of Benjamin Netanyahu stonewalled on further pullbacks and began placing onerous security demands on Arafat. Only one withdrawal occurred from a miserly 3% of occupied territory. Essentially, Arafat and the PNA would have to follow to the letter all of Israel's security concerns before being given significant chunks of occupied territory. The PNA was then in the invidious position of meeting Israel's ever-escalating security concerns without being given any tangible political benefits in the form of more territory. The Oslo formula of 'Land for Peace' was beginning to fray.

When Ehud Barak came to power, he did not agree with further staged withdrawals and wanted to proceed to the final status talks. This meant that Arafat entered the final status talks in

Camp David in a far weaker negotiating position than envisaged under the Oslo Peace process. Essentially, Israel was in violation of the Oslo Accords but with the complicit cooperation of President William Clinton, Arafat was pressured to come to Camp David and participate in the final talks.

Controversy still exists over what happened at Camp David. What does appear clear is that Barak offered far more than any previous Israeli leader in forging a peace agreement. Barak was willing to go that extra mile in gaining a peace agreement and had staked his political future on an agreement. In that sense, he showed exactly the kind of vision and courage shown by Arafat in signing on to the Oslo Peace Accords. For Arafat, the deal offered simply wasn't good enough. He wanted more and was willing to spurn Clinton and Barak for a more favorable settlement later. Arafat returned and received acclaim from the Palestinian population and Arab states for holding firm to his principles. Barak returned to a gloomy reception for having offered so much and still gaining nothing in return.

In rejecting a deal both at Camp David and subsequent negotiations up to the 2000 Israeli elections, which saw the ouster of Barak, Arafat committed a tragic political mistake. The difficulty here in criticizing him is that he has every right, as a political leader, to hold out for a more favorable settlement. However, in holding out for more, the potential for political violence increased to the extent that this endangered the achievements of the peace process thus far.

The political violence did eventually begin with the visit of Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount complex and the subsequent violent reaction by the Palestinian community. One thing that becomes clear in the political developments since is that Arafat has been complicit in the use of political violence for his goal. He has been disingenuous in his efforts to contain violence. Arafat has detained Palestinian militants and released them later; he has made numerous statements for the benefits of the Western media to stop the violence but failed to follow through; and he has made distinctions between attacks on Israel proper and Israeli settlements in the occupied territories. Arafat is playing a dangerous game of simultaneously supporting what he views as legitimate national struggle against Israeli Occupation while trying to suppress terrorism strikes against Israeli cities. This makes him complicit in the terrorism used by Palestinian militant organizations rather than a sponsor – a fine distinction that is important in assessing the political violence he is trying to manage as part of his strategic goals.

The September 11 attacks on New York and the Pentagon offered Arafat the opportunity to move more aggressively against Palestinian militants, something that he has done rhetorically if not on the streets. At the same time as Arafat's vacillating efforts, the government of Sharon has shown it is pursuing its own agenda. What needs to be emphasized here is that many in the Likud Party have never accepted the 'Land for Peace' formula in the Oslo Accords, nor has it accepted the creation of a *viable* Palestinian state. Understanding the political reality of the Accords and the support it has in the US and Europe, many in the Sharon government have simply given their rhetorical support to the Accords while acting in ways that completely

undermine it. For example, Israel continues to expand existing settlements, when this is proscribed under the Accords, and has never come up with any framework to follow up on Israel's obligations under the Accords for two further partial withdrawals from the occupied territories before preceding to the thorny final status issues. What we have instead is an escalating series of demands on Arafat and the PNA to rein in violence. At the same time, the infrastructure of the PNA is attacked so we have the rather unique phenomenon of Israel attacking PNA security installations while demanding that the PNA get tough on terrorists – the political equivalent to squaring the circle.

To sum up, two intertwined phenomena help explain the current stalemate in Israel/Palestine. First, is the tragic set of choices made by Arafat in not taking full advantage of Barak's willingness to come up with a political settlement and Arafat's poor tactical choice of allowing a decentralized campaign of violence to further his political goals. Second, Sharon has demonstrated an insincerity in following through on the Oslo Accords and has pursued an agenda designed to isolate and weaken Arafat with the ultimate goal of gaining a favorable international climate for a military solution to the Palestinian problem as witnessed by events up to September 2002.

We therefore have some answers to the questions posed earlier. The PNA is complicit in terrorism, but not a sponsor. Israel's military campaign against the PNA is directed against a national liberation struggle rather than part of a war on terrorism. While Arafat and the PNA are behaving in ways inconsistent to the Oslo Accords, they nevertheless remain committed to the political process that underscores the Accords. The Sharon government is also behaving in a manner that is inconsistent with the Accords, but this is part of a Likud agenda that effectively undermines the Accords and makes them redundant in terms of what a Likud government solution would look like. The respective leaders of the two sides, Arafat and Sharon, are mirror images of one another. Arafat doesn't 'walk the talk' of ending terrorist attacks on Israel, and Sharon doesn't 'walk the talk' of settling the conflict through sincere dialogue.

As a result, we were witnesses to an unprecedented level of violence between the Israel and the PNA up to September 2002. While Israel/Palestine bleeds, the world watches with disbelief and horror. The obvious conclusion from this analysis is that a solution is not likely given the quality of the political leadership of both Palestinians and Israel. What's the next step? An international peacekeeping force? A UN mandate for the occupied territories? The US strong arming both leaderships to implement a US-designed solution based on the frameworks discussed at Camp David? All these options are being currently debated by theorists and policy makers. What I'd like to do here is offer my own rather unique solution.

In offering my solution I want to begin by identifying the source of the problem – you, the reader! I see the situation in Israel/Palestine and your interest in it as a mirror image of your own subjective 'private' world. Yes, that's right! You believe you live in an objective 'real' world that exists independently of your own subjective creation. In fact, you live in a subjective

world where your interaction with others gives you the illusion of an objective world characterized by war, terrorism, exploitation, and so forth. In fact, what's happening is the interaction of many individuals sharing the belief systems of their own subjective worlds and finding enough in common to fuel the common perception of an objective 'real' world.

What is happening in Israel/Palestine is merely a mirror image of your own 'private' world. The macro is an image of the micro. Reflect on things happening to you as an individual. Focus on those things that parallel the quality of leadership, the emotions of people involved in the Israel/Palestine conflict, and the tragic events occurring. In what ways are these symbolic of your own thoughts, feelings, and events in your life? Do you fail to walk the talk of peace and harmony in your life? Do you practice emotional honesty? In what ways do you fail to walk the talk of violence reduction – whether it's removing aspects of verbal, emotional, psychological or physical violence in your life? Reflect on your emotions as you are reading the words in this article and the ideas being expressed. How do you feel? Anger, hostility, resignation, overwhelmed? Whatever emotions you feel have parallels with what the populations in Israel/Palestine are thinking and feeling.

The solution I'm proposing to what's happening is quite simple. Change your own private world. The degree to which you have an interest and fascination in the Israel/Palestine conflict suggests a 'symbiotic connection' between you and Israel/Palestine – otherwise you would never have read this far! The nature of this 'connection,' to whatever extent such a symbiotic connection holds true for you, is that if you change your own 'private' world, there will be a corresponding change in the 'real' world. *Resolving the violent conflict in Israel/Palestine is only possible if you, the reader, transform within yourself all the symbolic representations in your own life of what's currently wrong in Israel/Palestine!* This process can be summed up as 'personal empowerment', where one takes a share in the responsibility for things happening around them, rather than projecting all responsibility to external actors and factors. This short-circuits the process of attributing responsibility through rational analysis of what we perceive to be objectively happening around us and completely unconnected to our own subjective worlds.

So it is not just the Israelis and Palestinians who are responsible for the violence occurring in Israel/Palestine, it is you the reader who, to whatever extent, is unable to deal with similar emotional issues that lie unresolved or deeply hidden in your own personal life and interactions with others. Personal empowerment in the sense of not abdicating our share of responsibility in all that happens in 'our world' needs to complement more large-scale political processes designed to settle the conflict. Personal empowerment is the missing ingredient in any recipe for resolving the Israel/Palestine conflict.

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