

Netanyahu's speech for peace: Is Anyone listening?

By Lanny J. Davis The Washington Times July 13, 2009

I really don't get it. On June 14, less than a month after his meeting with President Obama, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gave one of the most comprehensive, thoughtful and highly personal speeches supporting the Israeli-Palestinian peace process of any Israeli prime minister in recent years, perhaps ever.

One would have thought his speech would have been big news in the U.S., Europe and elsewhere. Mr. Netanyahu for the first time clearly stated he would support a two-state solution, albeit with understandable requirements to guarantee Israel's security, despite leaving a different impression during last month's U.S. visit.

Yet, the reaction of governments and media in the U.S. and Europe was the functional equivalent of a tree falling in the forest with no one listening. Where it was covered, the writing emphasized the cynical and focused on the half-empty, rather than the half-full, glass.

So let's take a closer look at what could turn out to be a very significant, game-changing speech. It can be divided, essentially, into four parts: personal, historic, diplomatic and economic.

The personal aspect of the speech deals with the issue of peace. At one point, Mr. Netanyahu spoke directly to the Palestinian people: "We want to live with you in peace, as good neighbors. We want our children and your children to never again experience war: that parents, brothers and sisters will never again know the agony of losing loved ones in battle; that our children will be able to dream of a better future and realize that dream; and that together we will invest our energies in plowshares and pruning hooks, not swords and spears."

And then he reminded Palestinians that for him and his family, peace and war are quite personal: "I know the face of war. I have experienced battle. I lost close friends. I lost a brother. I have seen the pain of bereaved families. I do not want war. No one in Israel wants war."

Mr. Netanyahu also spent time in his speech on history, but not to relitigate the ancient argument over who lived in Palestine first or for the longest time. Rather, Mr. Netanyahu explained that the "root of the conflict" has been based on a fundamental misstatement of undeniable historical facts.

Palestinians have been taught that Israel was founded largely by alien foreigners, foisted on the native Palestinians by Europeans feeling guilty over

the Holocaust. That misstatement has been the central rationale for Arab and Palestinian unwillingness to publicly recognize Israel as a Jewish state.

In fact, he points out, "the attacks against us began in the 1920s," 20 years before the Holocaust. And the undeniable historical fact is that "the Jewish people and the land of Israel go back over 3,500 years" - when Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, forefathers of all Jews; David and Solomon, ancient Israel's two greatest kings; and Isaiah and Jeremiah, two of the Jewish religion's greatest spiritual prophets, all lived in what was then Judea and Samaria, which today is called the West Bank.

"The right of the Jewish people to a state in the land of Israel does not derive from the cascade of catastrophes that befell our people," the prime minister said. "There are those who say that if the Holocaust had not occurred, the state of Israel would never have been established. But I say if the state of Israel would have been established earlier, it is the Holocaust that would not have occurred."

Third, the prime minister addressed the two simple requirements for peace between Israel and the Palestinians: recognition and security.

As to the first, he put it quite simply: "A fundamental prerequisite for ending the conflict is a public, binding and unequivocal Palestinian recognition of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people."

As to the security, it is also quite simple: Palestine must be demilitarized, as guaranteed by the international community, with open skies, no military alliances with hostile powers, and "effective security measures to prevent weapons smuggling into the territory - real monitoring, and not what occurs in Gaza today."

Once these two issues of recognition and security for Israel have been guaranteed, the rest of the difficult issues seem to come much easier: no more new settlements, with some wiggle room for the natural growth of current settlements caused by families growing; equitable treatment and assistance in placing refugees in land and homes outside of Israel (to preserve the essence of historic Israel as a Jewish state).

And on the always controversial issue of Jerusalem, Mr. Netanyahu was deftly ambiguous: "Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, must remain undivided, with continued religious freedom for all

faiths." That does not seem to exclude Palestinian de facto control over certain parts of Jerusalem and certainly over their holy places.

Finally, the prime minister expressed a clear and concrete vision of economic prosperity for Palestinians in partnership with Israel. Indeed, he stated that such economic prosperity can come even before a final peace agreement is reached.

"An economic peace is not a substitute for a political peace but an important element in achieving it. Together we can undertake projects that overcome the scarcities of our region, like water desalination, or maximize its advantages, like developing solar energy, and exploiting our geographic location by laying gas and petroleum lines and establishing transportation links between Asia, Africa and Europe. ...

"Together we can develop industrial areas that will generate thousands of jobs and develop tourist sites that will attract millions of visitors eager to walk in the footsteps of history - in Nazareth and in Bethlehem, around the walls of Jericho and the walls of Jerusalem, on the banks of the Sea of Galilee, and the baptismal site on the banks of the Jordan."

Who cannot be moved by these words? Perhaps Mr. Netanyahu has it right - a new sequencing of the peace process: First, economic partnership and

prosperity between Israelis and Palestinians; and then peace, not the other way around.

It could not have been by accident that Mr. Netanyahu chose to deliver his remarkable speech at the Begin-Sadat Center at Bar-Ilan University. It was slightly more than 30 years ago, on March 26, 1979, that Prime Minister Menachem Begin, as the leader of the right-wing Likud or "Consolidation" Party, joined with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and signed a historic peace agreement between Israel and Egypt.

Now another man of the right, another Likud prime minister some three decades later, seems poised to make the lasting peace between Israel and Palestinians that has so long eluded his predecessors.

One wonders whether Mr. Netanyahu might also be thinking: If Richard Nixon could go to China because of a base on the right that trusted him, then I can bring peace and prosperity between Israelis and Palestinians.

Let's hope - and pray - that he is right.

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Arabs Need to Talk to the Israelis By Shaikh Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa

We need fresh thinking if the Arab Peace Initiative is to have the impact it deserves on the crisis that needlessly impoverishes Palestinians and endangers Israel's security.

This crisis is not a zero-sum game. For one side to win, the other does not have to lose.

The peace dividend for the entire Middle East is potentially immense. So why have we not gotten anywhere?

Our biggest mistake has been to assume that you can simply switch peace on like a light bulb. The reality is that peace is a process, contingent on a good idea but also requiring a great deal of campaigning -- patiently and repeatedly targeting all relevant parties. This is where we as Arabs have not done enough to communicate directly with the people of Israel.

An Israeli might be forgiven for thinking that every Muslim voice is raised in hatred, because that is usually the only one he hears. Just as an Arab might be forgiven for thinking every Israeli wants the destruction of every Palestinian.

Essentially, we have not done a good enough job demonstrating to Israelis how our initiative can form part of a peace between equals in a troubled land holy to three great faiths. Others have been less

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reticent, recognizing that our success would threaten their vested interest in keeping Palestinians and Israelis at each other's throats. They want victims to stay victims so they can be manipulated as proxies in a wider game for power. The rest of us -- the overwhelming majority -- have the opposite interest.

It is in our interest to speak up now for two reasons. First, we will all be safer once we drain the pool of antipathy in which hatemongers from both sides swim.

Second, peace will bring prosperity. Already, the six oil and gas nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council have grown into a powerful trillion-dollar market. Removing the ongoing threat of death and destruction would open the road to an era of enterprise, partnership and development on an even greater scale for the region at large.

That is the glittering prize for resolving the dilemma of justice for Palestine without injustice to Israel. Effectively, this is the meta-issue that defines and distorts the self-image of Arabs and diverts too much of our energies away from the political and economic development the region needs.

The wasted years of deadlock have conditioned Israelis to take on a fortress mentality that automatically casts all Palestinians as the enemy --

and not as the ordinary, decent human beings they are.

Speaking out matters, but it is not enough. Our governments and all stakeholders also must be ready to carry out practical measures to help ease the day-to-day hardship of Palestinian lives.

The two communities in the Holy Land are not fated to be enemies. What can unite them tomorrow is potentially bigger than what divides them today.

Both sides need help from their friends, in the form of constructive engagement, to reach a just settlement.

What we don't need is the continued reflexive rejection of any initiative that seeks to melt the ice. Consider the response so far to the Arab peace plan, pioneered by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. This initiative is a genuine effort to normalize relations between the entire Arab region and Israel, in return for Israel's withdrawal from occupied territory and a fair resolution of the plight of the Palestinians, far too many of whom live in refugee camps in deplorable conditions.

We must stop the small-minded waiting game in which each side refuses to budge until the other side makes the first move. We've got to be bigger than that. All sides need to take simultaneous, good-faith action if peace is to have a chance. A real, lasting peace requires comprehensive engagement and reconciliation at the human level. This will happen only if we address and settle the core issues dividing the Arab and the Israeli peoples, the first being the question of Palestine and occupied Arab lands. The fact that this has not yet happened helps to explain why the Jordanian and Egyptian peace accords with Israel are cold. They have not been comprehensive.

Enduring Nonsense

By Daniel Mandel FrontPageMag.com

The myth that resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will lead to a Utopian Mideastern peace lives on.

The other week, responding to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech that envisaged creating a demilitarized Palestinian state, perennial Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak noted, "I told President Obama that solving the crises of the Arab and Muslim worlds goes through Jerusalem." The week before, General David Petraeus, head of the U.S. military's Central Command, said, "Hezbollah's justifications for existence will become void...if the Palestinian cause is resolved."

The notion that the Israeli/Arab conflict lies at the core of Middle Eastern problems has been popular among the political class for years:

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon: "If the issues with the conflicts between Israel and Palestine

We should move toward real peace now by consulting and educating our people and by reaching out to the Israeli public to highlight the benefits of a genuine peace.

To be effective, we must acknowledge that, like people everywhere, the average Israeli's primary window on the world is his or her local and national media. Our job, therefore, is to tell our story more directly to the Israeli people by getting the message out to their media, a message reflecting the hopes of the Arab mainstream that confirms peace as a strategic option and advocates the Arab Peace Initiative as a means to this end. Some conciliatory voices in reply from Israel would help speed the process.

Some Arabs, simplistically equating communication with normalization, may think we are moving too fast toward normalization. But we all know that dialogue must be enhanced for genuine progress. We all, together, need to take the first crucial step to lay the groundwork to effectively achieve peace. So we must all invest more in communication.

Once we achieve peace, trade will follow. We can then create a "virtuous circle," because trade will create its own momentum. By putting real money into people's hands and giving them real power over their lives, trade will help ensure the durability of peace. The day-to-day experience would move minds and gradually build a relationship of trust and mutual interest, without which long-term peacemaking is impossible.

When stability pays, conflict becomes too costly. We must do more, now, to achieve peace.

The writer is crown prince of Bahrain.

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go well, [resolutions of] other issues in the Middle East, including Lebanon, Iran, Iraq and Syria, are likely to follow suit" (January 2007).

Jordan's King Abdullah: "solving the Israeli-Palestinian problem, allows us to tackle the other issues around us ... Whether people like it or not, the linchpin is always the Israeli-Palestinian problem" (January 2007).

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak: "I expressed to the President the centrality of [this] conflict to the people of the region ... [putting] the peace process back on track is central to enhancing the prospects of reform and the prosperity in the region" (April 2004).

Then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair: "[Middle Eastern] terrorism will not be defeated without peace in the Middle East between Israel and Palestine" (July 2003).

In fact, it was this very idea that led America in 1991, vigorous and prestigious in the Middle East

after vanquishing Saddam Hussein in Kuwait, to try and terminate it.

At the time, American time and talent might have been better utilized urging Arab allies to liberalize their tyrannies or on off-setting the destabilizing constellation represented by Syria's Assad and the Iranian mullahs.

Instead, then-U.S. President George H.W. Bush and his Secretary of State, James Baker, chose to think that solving the Arab-Israeli conflict was central and achievable – much like President Obama does today and George W. Bush did before him.

Yet, even before Bush and Baker gave international sanction to the centrality myth, history had already pronounced it a nonsense.

The Arab-Israeli conflict had no bearing on the Algerian war in the 1950s; Egypt's invasion of Yemen, the bloody emergence of the Ba'athist dictatorship in Iraq, or the Aden Emergency, all in the 1960s; or the Libyan-Chad war in the late 1970s; or the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, which claimed a million lives; or Iraq's invasion and annexation of Kuwait in 1990.

Nor did it have any bearing on events that were to follow – like Saddam's subsequent massacres of hundreds of thousands of Kurds and Shia, the Taliban seizure of most of Afghanistan, or the descent of Somalia into a Hobbesian arena of rival militias.

Nonetheless, Bush and Baker convened the 1991 Madrid Arab-Israeli peace conference, which was succeeded by the Oslo process between Israelis and Palestinians. All must now agree that the results were the opposite of peace and reconciliation – in that conflict, or any other.

But Oslo's collapse failed to induce a reappraisal of either the alleged centrality of the Arab-Israeli conflict or its capacity for resolution.

The same James Baker was to be found reinvigorating the old centrality chestnut as co-author of the 2006 Iraq Study Group, which again declared regional peace and progress to be hostage to a resolvable Arab-Israeli animosity.

However, reality still fails to oblige. Israelis, long reconciled to the idea of a Palestinian state and still largely of the view that a peace settlement would entail creating one, no longer believe that doing so will bring it peace and therefore oppose it. Negotiated withdrawals in the West Bank and unilateral ones from Gaza and southern Lebanon having failed to bring peace and acceptance, Israelis oppose more concessions.

Indeed, examining the words and deeds of the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, Hamas in Gaza, and the temper of Palestinian opinion favoring terrorism and rejecting Israel's existence, the only possible conclusion is that Palestinians neither accept Israel as a Jewish state,

nor revile terrorism against it performed in their name, nor see Palestinian statehood as a goal whose attainment should change either of these facts.

But supposing for a moment that none of this were true and the conflict presently resolvable, it would still be difficult to see what possible influence an Israeli-Palestinian peace could produce elsewhere in the Middle East.

The Taliban and al-Qaeda would not lay down their arms in Afghanistan or Pakistan because of such an agreement.

The Sudanese regime and the Janjaweed militia would not end their slaughter of black animists in Darfur upon news of an Israeli-Palestinian peace treaty.

The Islamic Courts Union in Somalia would not desist in its efforts to dominate the country, let alone dispatch an ambassador to Israel.

The Iranian regime would not revise its determination that Israel must be wiped from the map, just because Israel would now be sharing it with a neighboring country called Palestine.

Islamist terrorists would still shed the blood of Hindus in India, Buddhists in Thailand and Catholics in the Philippines. And they would still shed the blood of fellow Muslims in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Turkey.

This being the case, declaring that the Israeli-Palestinian impasse lies at the heart of regional turbulence and global threat is not an assertion about the importance of producing an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. Rather, it is a formulation whose origins lie in hostility to Israel's existence, a hostility that precludes the prospect of terminating the conflict even as it blames Israel for it.

It is an insinuation of Israeli illegitimacy and guilt, made by the devious (Abdullah, Mubarak) and restated by the credulous (Ban, Blair). Into which category President Obama falls remains to be seen.

Interestingly, President Obama shied away from explicitly calling the Arab-Israeli conflict the core issue in the Middle East in his Cairo speech last month: there, it became the second of four such issues, the other three being unspecified "violent extremists" (al-Qaeda and their ilk), nuclear proliferation and democracy (more precisely, the lack thereof) in the region. Nonetheless, the pride of place the Obama Administration is giving the Arab-Israeli issue; the overt connection it has drawn between it and the resolution of other matters, like Iran's drive for nuclear weapons; and its endorsement of the Arab demand that Jews stop moving to the West Bank and even eastern Jerusalem, are all hallmarks of a belief in its centrality.

Burying the myth of Arab-Israeli centrality, however, is easier said than done, because so many are invested in it.

For Arab despots, continuing blissfully unhindered in their repressive ways requires getting the U.S. to desist pestering them about pesky matters like human rights. This is best achieved by persuading the U.S. that the key to a liberalized Middle East lies in its working to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict first. This in turn leads successive administrations into pursuing Arab/Israeli diplomatic debacles for whose inevitable failure it can then be blamed by Arab despots.

U.S. support for Israel – which can be made to mean anything short of cutting off diplomatic and trade relations with it – will supply the necessary alibi for further conflict and the continued elusiveness of Arab warmth for America.

For Western politicians – in this context, the word statesmen grates – demanding further Israeli concessions in another foredoomed peace bid allows them to gratify Arab tyrants who export Muslim radicals to their shores while hoping for the best. Short of resolution, let alone a program, for resisting

Islamist encroachments at home, this is what passes for the strategy of the free world today.

In short, Middle Eastern pathologies caused and exacerbated the very conflict whose solution is now held out at as their cure. But as any doctor knows, treating symptoms rather than causes effects no cure; still less so, when the patient is only marginally responsive to palliative treatment. Invasive surgery on a weakened body lacking any prospect of success serves no purpose – unless the purpose be malign.

Breaking out of this dangerous, self-defeating cycle of delusion and distraction will be painful for the U.S. and the West. Expect therefore much continued avoidance and denial in Western chanceries.

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Gevalt! By The Jerusalem Post editorial

An innocent and devoted mother sits in jail because Zionist authorities want to make an example of her to intimidate God-fearing haredim struggling to preserve the sanctity of Jerusalem. The trumped-up charge that keeps this selfless (pregnant) lady behind bars is that for two years she starved her little boy almost to death.

They claim she is suffering from a psychiatric disorder, Munchausen syndrome-by-proxy, which caused her to harm her son to win attention for herself. What nonsense! Everyone knows she is perfectly normal.

Why isn't the media reporting the truth? The child suffered from cancer and had undergone chemotherapy. The doctors told his mother not to allow him food by mouth - which is why the three-year-old became so emaciated, requiring multiple hospitalizations, and ended up weighing seven kilograms. Everyone in the Hadassah oncology department knows this to be true; they saw how she stayed with the child from early morning until late at night.

Then one day she said something that offended some big-shot doctor, because they were doing experiments on the child. Naturally, our community is in an uproar over her unjust arrest...

This is a composite of the conspiracy theories circulating not just on the streets of Mea She'arim and Ramat Beit Shemesh, where the extremist, anti-Zionist Toldot Aharon hassidic sect - to which the troubled family adheres - and its fanatical Naturei Karta allies hold sway, but also in other ultra-Orthodox areas such as Jerusalem's Har Nof, where denizens lead considerably less insular lives. There is sympathy in the wider haredi world for the grievances of the rioters, who have vandalized traffic lights, burned garbage dumpsters and thrown projectiles at police, city workers and passing vehicles.

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Haredi women have conducted special prayer meetings for the mother's release. Hassidic politicians have denounced as "collective punishment" Mayor Nir Barkat's decision to suspend municipal services in the affected areas after city social services and sanitation workers came under attack. (Only Lithuanian haredi rabbis have urged their followers not to participate in the rioting.)

For the record, Dr. Yair Birnbaum, deputy director of Hadassah hospital, has confirmed that the abused child never had cancer, and was never treated with chemotherapy. Also that since the boy's separation from his mother, he has been gaining weight and his physical condition has improved.

That the haredi world - particularly Ashkenazi hassidim - finds it enormously difficult to grapple with child, sexual and spousal abuse comes to light when community members turn to the state for vital medical and social services. That's how we learned about Rabbi Elijah Chen, who instructed a gullible mother to cleanse her child of "satanic possession." And about Yisrael Walz, who shook his son to death - that became known when the infant was brought to hospital. Some haredim, fearing the diabolical designs of Zionist authorities, say they now hesitate to take their children to hospital.

There are dysfunctional families among all strata of Israeli society. But the only stratum that reacts with collective violence when abuse is exposed is the most insular subdivision of the haredi world.

Why is such antisocial behavior tacitly countenanced by the more conventional hassidim? Because they share values which hold that men should be gainfully unemployed, women socialized to believe that the back of the bus is where God

wants them, and youths reared to be clueless about the outside world.

Violence - stopping archeological digs (which might unearth Jewish graves) and protesting the opening on Shabbat of cinemas, 24/7 mini-markets, and parking garages outside their neighborhoods - has become a default, communally sanctioned response.

This impulse is emblematic of an alienation which, because it is ripping Israeli society apart, begs to be better understood. Haredim, like Arab citizens

of Israel, want to be accepted as different, yet feel shunned.

The Kerner Commission was established to examine the causes of rioting in America's inner cities; in Britain and France, commissions have examined Muslim unrest. Here in Israel, the Orr Commission investigated Arab rioting.

Perhaps we need a state commission to tell us not only why a volatile minority of hassidic sects periodically runs amok - but also how to discourage the culture of extreme insularity that lies at the root of their self-perpetuated estrangement.

Time to Extend Israeli Law to Meah Shearim

By Naomi Ragen NaomiRagen.com July 16, 2009

A woman is caught on tape detaching the feeding tube from her starving three-year old in Hadassah Hospital, after years of bringing the child in with unexplained medical conditions and bodily injuries. She is arrested by authorities for child endangerment and jailed. In response, her community backs her up, burns property and assaults police and social workers.

This story makes no sense until you add that the woman is haredi, a member of Neturei Karta sect in Jerusalem's Meah Shearim.

As citizens of Israel look on in astonishment today as the streets of its capital are set on fire and innocent passersby are subject to a pogrom of stones and curses, we long-time inhabitants of Jerusalem are not surprised.

For years, police and government authorities have treated Meah Shearim, the hotbed of virulent haredi anti-Israel provocations, as the French have treated the Arab suburbs of Paris, the banlieues: as a separate country, afraid to engage with its inhabitants, to enforce the laws of the nation.

It is a no-go zone, where citizens take the law into their hands, and inhabitants are subject to mob rule.

I saw this personally when I was writing my play Women's Minyan, which was based on the following true story: A haredi woman in Meah Shearim, mother of 12, found out her sexually abusive husband was having an affair with a married woman. When she finally stopped covering for him, and demanded he move out and give her a divorce, she found herself not only thrown out of the house, but attacked by armed haredi thugs who arrived at her doorstep.

Not finding her at home, they put her friend into the hospital. When she asked for child custody in the Rabbinical Courts, the Meah Shearim trained rabbinical judges colluded to ban her from any contact with her children forever. We took this case

to Israel's Supreme Court, which turned out to be absolutely spineless, sending it back to the Rabbinical Courts until the mother gave up in despair.

Members of Neturei Karta have actively befriended people like Arafat and Achmadinijad. The fact that they live in this country and don't send their children abroad (not true by the way) as one haredi apologist asserted today on television, doesn't make them loyal citizens.

For years, Israel society has allowed Meah Shearim - like Tul Karem and Ramallah-- to be off limits to Israeli law. If Israel authorities had asserted the law of the land on thugs who call themselves modesty patrols, perhaps the streets wouldn't be burning today. If municipal authorities had torn down the signs warning women what they can and can't wear on city streets, if the Ministry of Transportation had not given haredi thugs license to harass women passengers on public buses by caving in to absurd demands for "mehadrin" bus lines where women are forced to sit in the back, we wouldn't be seeing these riots today. If the police would be willing to aggressively investigate and prosecute child abusers and sexual predators and rapists hiding behind black clothes in dark corners of this city, where citizens are afraid to report abuse for fear of becoming targets of haredi thug patrols, we wouldn't be seeing this today. And if the Education Ministry would extend the laws of compulsory education and the basic curriculum to schools in Meah Shearim, we wouldn't be seeing this today.

The time has come to say there is only one Jewish State, with one set of laws and rules of behavior for all its citizens. There are no banlieues, no no-go zones. All Israel's citizens need to be subject to the same laws and penalties, the same obligations. Whether the crimes they commit are in the name of Hashem or the name of Allah.

Israel admits to an image crisis

By Jason Koutsoukis *The Age (Australia)*

July 4, 2009

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's communications chief, Ron Dermer, has admitted that Israel faces a serious public relations problem.

In his first interview since the Netanyahu Government took office in March, the Prime Minister's director of policy planning and communications has told *The Age* that it's time Israel switched its PR strategy from defence to offence.

"We have to break out of the straitjacket," Mr Dermer says. "We have to defend our own right to defend ourselves. It's not for other people to do it for us."

Despite launching a broadside at the way the foreign media and other organisations report events in Israel, Mr Dermer acknowledged that successive Israeli governments were also to blame for presenting a narrow argument.

"It is not enough for Israel to say that it wants peace. You must also say that you are not a thief. We did not steal another people's land. That is the core of this conflict," he says.

Six months after Israel launched a 22-day offensive in the besieged Gaza Strip that killed more than 1400 Palestinians, the country has faced one of the worst public relations crises in its 61-year history.

In the last week alone, Israel has been forced to defend itself against harsh criticisms in reports published by the Red Cross, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

Revelations that French President Nicolas Sarkozy had pressured Mr Netanyahu to dump his Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, because he was an embarrassment to Israel caused more headaches.

"I could go on for another half an hour," says Yigal Palmor, spokesman for Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Bar-Ilan University professor Eytan Gilboa, Israel's leading public diplomacy expert, says Israel will have to spend 10 times its current PR budget if it really wants to change international perceptions.

"We need to be spending \$US100 million (\$A124.7 million) a year on information campaigns abroad — primarily in Arab countries and then in Europe, where there is a complete lack of knowledge of what Israel is and what Israel does," Professor Gilboa says.

The power to persuade and shape understandings, what he calls "soft power", is a concept that Israeli governments have never properly understood.

"In terms of power, a properly organised information campaign can be worth several brigades," Professor Gilboa says.

Modern media tools like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, must also become part of a properly organised public diplomacy arsenal.

Others disagree, rejecting the notion that Israel's image abroad is the issue.

"I think Israel has a policy problem, not a PR problem," says Uri Dromi, who was director of Israel's Government Press Office under former prime minister Yitzhak Rabin.

"The biggest problem is that Israel should not be in the (occupied) West Bank in the first place. Who cares what people write about us?"

With the new Government's basic policy framework laid down, Mr Dermer, an American-born Israeli who has worked closely with Mr Netanyahu over the past decade, says his main focus will nonetheless be on what Israelis call "hasbara" — a word that roughly translates as "explanation".

In pursuing a strategy that will centralise the Israeli Government's responses to issues raised by the foreign media into a kind of war room, and make better use of public opinion research, Mr Dermer says Israel has to start shaming those countries and organisations that hold Israel to a different standard.

"(People) who get together to call for a boycott against Israel, are they also calling for a boycott against North Korea, the world's largest concentration camp? Against Iran, where they hang homosexuals?" Mr Dermer asks. "When you hold Israel to a standard that you won't hold another country to, what are you doing? You are being anti-Semitic."

Mr Dermer says the combined narratives of Israel as a Jewish state, the importance of Jerusalem to the Jewish, Christian and Islamic faiths, and the Middle East's tremendous oil reserves make a compelling world story that Israel must try to influence.

"Within this story is this narrative that has grown much stronger in recent years that is essentially false: people who see us as colonialist invaders.

"But once the Palestinians accept that we, the Jews, are here by right, that we are not foreign colonialists and we're not invaders — even if they say it (the land) is 1 per cent yours and 99 per cent ours — then we're in real negotiations."

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Bearing witness to the UN in Geneva

By Noam Bedein The Jerusalem Post July 15, 2009

On July 6, I traveled to Geneva to testify before the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict. Participating in the delegation were Ashkelon Mayor Benny Vaknin, Dr Alan Marcus, director of the strategic planning branch in Ashkelon, Ophir Shinhar of Sapir College and Dr. Mirelda Sidrer, who was wounded during a rocket attack on a medical facility at the Ashkelon mall.

The delegation also included Noam Schalit, who spoke impassionately on behalf of his son, Gilad, who was abducted three years ago by terrorists and has since been held by Hamas.

The government officially refused to cooperate with the UN mission, since the investigation had already formulated conclusions asserting that Israel had committed war crimes during the December-January war.

At the same time, however, the head of the UN fact-finding mission, South African Judge Richard Goldstone, told the Israeli media that he would like to hear both sides. "The aim of the public hearings was to let the face of human suffering be seen and to let the voices of the victims be heard."

In preparation for the Geneva hearing, the UN mission invited the Sderot Media Center to prepare material, footage and information regarding the impact of bombardment from Gaza of the civilian population in the Negev during the war.

Before the hearing, the delegation received a briefing from Hillel Neuer, head of the NGO UN Watch. He provided background on the fact-finding mission and the agenda of each judge on the investigating board.

During the days leading up to the testimony, it was not easy to sleep - as the only resident of Sderot and the Western Negev in this delegation - knowing that there would be only 30 minutes to convey how aerial terror has devastatingly impacted the civilian population. At the same time, the UN afforded an opportunity for the Sderot Media Center, which specializes in communicating the human story of Sderot and life under continuous rocket terror, to finally reach the UN.

While the delegation got ready to testify, it was less than sobering to know that the UN judges included Prof. Christine Chinkin from London. In a Sunday Times article published on January 11, she supported the allegation that "Israel's bombardment of Gaza is not self-defense, it's a war crime."

Israeli reporters in Geneva asked hard questions: Why testify before a such a "neutral" judge who claims that Israel does not have the right

to defend her citizens and whose actions "amount to aggression violating international law and human rights law?" Why testify when the government itself has boycotted the investigation which already formulated it allegations against Israel before the investigation commenced? However, the presence of a UN invited delegation from Israel created a precedent.

Neuer noted that never in the 16 years of operating in Geneva had there been a time when the UN invited and even sponsored a delegation from Israel to give testimony - until now.

This time, the UN provided an opportunity for ordinary people from Israel to make their voices heard across the world. It was an honor as a resident of Sderot to participate in such an event.

Yet the long road to peace and justice for Sderot and Negev residents does not end before a panel of UN judges or a commissioned report. Residents are obligated to speak up and convey the experience of what it is like to live under sustained rocket attacks, a terror act and crime against humanity.

After screening two short videos in front of the panel, which depicted the 15 seconds that Sderot residents and their children have to run for their lives when the rocket alarm is activated, I concluded my presentation with the following thoughts and questions.

"I do not have enough fingers to count on my hands the amount of times rockets exploded just a few meters from a kindergarten. Would any other Western democracy tolerate even one rocket being fired toward its territory? Why is it that we must wait until a kindergarten or classroom packed with children is struck directly by a rocket in order for Israel to gain international support, to protect and do what is right for our own people?"

US President Barack Obama put it best when he visited a devastated home in Sderot during the 2008 campaign: "If somebody was sending rockets into my house where my two daughters sleep at night, I'm going to do everything in my power to stop that, and would expect Israel to do the same thing."

There were no questions or reactions from the UN judges. We will all have to wait, along with all the residents of the South, to peruse the Geneva verdict on the war when the UN mission report is released in September.

The writer is director of the Sderot Media Center.

What happened to the Suicide Bombers of Jerusalem?

By Christopher Hitchens Slate Magazine July 13, 2009

It is sometimes important to write about the things that are not happening and the dogs that are not barking.

To do so, of course, can provide an easy hostage to fortune, which is why a lot of columnists prefer not to risk it. For all I know, some leering fanatic is preparing to make me look silly even as I write. But I ask anyway: Whatever happened to the suicide bombers of Jerusalem?

It's not that long since the combination of self-immolation and mass murder was a regular event on Israeli soil. Different people drew radically different conclusions from the campaign, which had a nerve-racking effect not just on Israeli Jews but on Israeli Arabs and Druze—who were often among the casualties—and on visiting tourists. It was widely said by liberals, including people as eminent as Tony Blair's wife, Cherie Blair, that the real cause of such a lurid and awful tactic was despair: the reaction of a people under occupation who had no other avenue of expression for their misery and frustration.

Well, surely nobody will be so callous as to say that there is less despair among Palestinians today—especially since the terrible events in the Gaza Strip and the return to power of the Israeli right wing as well as the expansion of Jewish-zealot settler activity. And yet there is no graph on which extra despair can be shown to have eventuated in more suicide. Indeed, if there is any correlation at all, it would seem to be in reverse. How can this be?

Of the various alternative explanations, one would be the success of the wall or "fence" that Israel has built or is building, approximating but not quite conforming to the "green line" of the 1967 frontier. Another would be the ruthless campaign of "targeted assassinations," whereby Israeli agents took out important leaders of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, the two organizations most committed to "martyrdom operations." A third might be the temporary truces or cease-fires to which Hamas (but not Islamic Jihad) have from time to time agreed.

But, actually, none of these would explain why the suicide campaign went into remission. Or, at least, they would not explain why it went into remission if the original cause was despair. If despair is your feeling, then nothing can stop you from blowing yourself up against the wall as a last gesture against Israeli colonial architecture. If despair dominates your psyche, then targeted assassinations of others are not going to stop you from donning the shroud and the belt and aiming yourself at paradise, even if only at a roadblock. If despair is what has invaded your mind, why on earth would you care about this or that short-term truce?

Even before the assault died away, there were good reasons to doubt that despair had been the motive or the explanation. For one thing, almost all the suicide attacks were directed at civilians in pre-1967 Israel "proper"—in other words, in the Jewish part of Jerusalem or in towns along the Israeli coastline (in one case, a hotel in Netanya on Passover). It can probably be said with some degree of confidence that nobody blows themselves up for a half-a-loaf compromise solution. These cold-blooded attacks did not just avoid well-defended West Bank settlements or Israeli army bases; they also vividly expressed the demand that all Jews leave Palestine or risk being killed. Despair cannot so easily be channeled so as to underline a strictly political/ideological objective.

Another possible reason for the slump in suicide is that those who were orchestrating it came to find that the tactic was becoming subject to diminishing returns. Despair must have meant a roughly constant stream of potential volunteers, but the immediate needs of Hamas and Islamic Jihad may not have always required the tap of despair to be left turned on. Indeed, there must have been some quite intense private discussions about how to turn it off. Not every despairing person can make, at home, the necessary belts, fuses, and lethal charges. These things require a godfather. And this, in turn, prompts the question: What will be said if or when the tap is ever turned back on? Surely it won't quite do to say that despair must have broken out all over again, though I can easily think of some fools who will be ready to say it.

There were children among the last wave of suicide-murderers, some of whom lost their nerve and surrendered at the last moment. There were also young women, some of whom, it seems, would otherwise have been killed for "honor" reasons and who were offered the relatively painless alternative of a martyr's fate. Nasty, vicious, fanatical old men, not human emotions, were making the decisions and deciding the days and the hours of death. And the hysterical ululating street celebrations when such a mission was successful did not signify despair at all but a creepy form of religious exaltation in which relatives were encouraged to make a feast out of the death of their own children as well as those of other people. To have added the promise of paradise to this pogrom is to have made spiritual and mental sickness complete; to have made it a sexual paradise is obscene into the bargain. (Women martyrs are obviously not offered the same level of bliss and promiscuity by the Quran.)

Meanwhile, the wall still stands and grows, ironically expressing the much more banal and

worldly fact that there are two peoples in Palestine and that sooner or later there will be two states as well.

A prospect for peace

By Joel Mowbray **The Washington Times**

Following a surprising speech in which he uttered the words "Palestinian state" for the first time, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has strengthened his standing at home and abroad, far exceeding expectations from all quarters.

Though Sunday's address received only modest coverage in the United States, it already has shifted the dynamics of the inevitable peace talks. Contrary to the media's conventional wisdom, however, Israel's stronger negotiating position actually increases the odds of genuine, measurable progress for the Palestinians in the near term.

Emphasizing that positive steps could be taken almost immediately, a high-ranking Knesset staffer used a football analogy to explain that the Obama administration has an important question to answer: "Do they want to go for a Hail Mary pass, or will they be happy moving the ball forward?"

No amount of bromides and wishful thinking can change the reality that a permanent agreement has never been within reach. Israel, of course, has long been willing to make painful concessions, and the broader public still supports some form of a two-state solution. What has been lacking has been a willing partner on the other side of the bargaining table.

Former Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat famously walked away from a generous deal in July 2000 that offered him almost his every request. Shortly thereafter, he ushered in the so-called Intifada, an unprecedented campaign of suicide bombings targeting Israeli civilians in buses, markets and cafes. Since then, matters have deteriorated. Palestinians suffer not just a crisis of leadership, but also a crisis of culture. Thanks to the dogged efforts of groups such as Palestinian Media Watch and Middle East Media Research Institute, we know Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza miss no opportunity in textbooks or television to poison the minds of parents and children alike.

It is little wonder that terrorism remains more popular with Palestinians than does peaceful coexistence with a Jewish state.

Much has been made - correctly - of Mr. Netanyahu's insistence that any future Palestinian state be demilitarized and accept Israel as Jewish, but two other provisions in his speech likely will be the initial focal points as soon as talks start.

In calling on the Palestinians to "turn toward peace ... in educating their children for peace and in stopping incitement against Israel," Mr. Netanyahu brought to the front burner a subject largely ignored

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by the three prime ministers who served since his last term ended 10 years ago. Here Western governments actually possess substantial leverage, as it is their taxpayers' money that underwrites most Palestinian education and media.

Parallel to curbing indoctrination is Mr. Netanyahu's idea of "economic peace," which would entail fortifying the Palestinian economy and rebuilding the institutions of civil society. Advisers to the Israeli prime minister think conditions on the ground - cultural, political, economic - must improve before the Palestinian society will be ready to embrace peace with Israel.

Unlikely to be a major near-term sticking point is the issue that has generated the most attention in recent weeks: Israeli settlements. People close to Mr. Netanyahu think the highly publicized spat has been overblown and any differences with the Obama administration will be resolved soon.

Most important was the impact the speech had on Mr. Netanyahu's political standing inside Israel. Improbably, he garnered praise from the right and left; his approval skyrocketed 16 percent overnight.

His right-wing coalition was pleased that he didn't cave to President Obama on settlements or propose a Palestinian state that would be capable of attacking Israel.

Helping him most with shoring up support from the center and the left, though, were the shockingly coarse responses from across the Arab world to Mr. Netanyahu's insistence that Israel be recognized as Jewish. Presumably speaking on behalf of moderate Fatah leader and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said flatly, "In a thousand years, no Palestinian leader will accept this."

"If they won't accept us as a Jewish state, then when will they ever accept us?" asked Shmuel, a 70-year-old native Israeli who supported the Oslo accords and has mostly voted for left-wing candidates. Such was the sentiment across Israel, where ordinary citizens are leery of making concessions to people who won't even agree to their country's right to exist.

Speculation that peace is dead or hopelessly delayed misses the point. Oslo proved that a signed deal alone does not bring peace. On the table now is the prospect of making life better for Palestinians, laying the necessary foundation for a future state that is stable and - most important - committed to peace.

For the sake of all parties, Mr. Obama should not waste this historic opportunity.