

Halting the cycle; Mideast peace can be achieved; here's how

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IN SEPTEMBER 2000, the intifada began, trapping Israelis and Palestinians in a cycle of violence that has claimed hundreds of lives. The first few weeks were marked by street clashes between Palestinian protesters and Israeli soldiers, but in the ensuing months the conflict has escalated to include Palestinian suicide attacks, guerrilla warfare and Israeli army incursions into Palestinian areas. Despite numerous peacemaking efforts, many of the heaviest days of killing have taken place in recent weeks. By now the pattern of violence and vengeance may seem unbreakable, but some see a way out.

Conflicts must reach a level of intolerability before the parties are willing to make the necessary political concessions for peace. Whether such a level has been reached by Palestinians and Israelis is yet to be determined.

Since September 2000, the human toll and destruction have been unparalleled.

The Palestinians have suffered about 1,200 deaths and 14,000 woundings, the destruction of 5,000 homes and businesses, the loss of 100 public buildings, the uprooting of 25,000 trees and the tearing apart of their economic and social fabric. On the Israeli side, more than 350 have been killed, 400 injured and 20 structures destroyed or damaged, and they too have faced economic losses through the costs of war and the evaporation of tourism revenues.

The Palestinians kill mostly with suicide bombers and snipers, the Israelis with U.S.-supplied F-16s, Apache helicopters, tanks, artillery and a powerful army. The asymmetry of force is as obvious as the disparity in consequences.

The Palestinians cannot win and, for that matter, neither can the Israelis, though they can inflict greater punishment than their opponents. But this can change, if Palestinian leadership decides that some or all of its 35,000-member security force, though armed

only with light weapons, should be turned into a fighting army.

The Israelis will then suffer significant casualties, as will the Palestinians. The end, however, will remain unchanged, whether the casualties are 1,200 for the Palestinians or 12,000, and whether they are 350 for the Israelis or 3,500. A political settlement must be reached.

To wait for a higher human toll before coming to such an agreement is not only immoral, it is sure to make peace more difficult.

There are also inalterable geographic and demographic realities whose significance cannot be ignored. Israel's population of close to 6 million includes an estimated 800,000 Palestinians who are citizens. All-out war with the Palestinians will spread inside Israel, with more devastating consequences than we can predict.

The Palestinian territories, with a population of 3 million, will remain contiguous to Israel no matter where the ultimate boundaries are drawn. In the next 30 years, these populations will almost double, placing 14 million people in that small area who will be trying to exist without economic, social and political ties. Palestinians and Israelis will either beneficially co-exist in the decades to come or find themselves divided by walls and barbed wires punctuated with pernicious levels of violence.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat are incapable of envisioning an accord that portends otherwise, and the U.S. initiatives are limited to achieving a cease- fire and resumption of negotiations. The parties have developed a great deal of animosity as a result of the inhuman way they have dealt with each other.

Talking about protracted confidence-building measures before a substantive agreement is reached is a road map to disaster.

This is why a recent plan by Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres being negotiated with Ahmed Qureia, speaker of the Palestinian parliament, is so wise. It calls for the immediate establishment of a Palestinian state and direct negotiations on the level of parity between the two states. This would give the Palestinians a sense of dignity and

responsibility and would end the uncertainty of the Palestinian people's political future.

The economies of Israel and a Palestinian state will necessarily be intertwined.

Plans have to be made now for the reconstruction of the devastated territories and the beginning of a mutually beneficial economic relationship. The first steps relate to utilities, transportation, roads, banking, and the movement of goods and people. Economic relations with Jordan and Egypt also have to be planned on a multilateral basis, as well as with Lebanon and Syria because of the Litani and Jordan Rivers, which are sources of water.

Because Israel places security as its highest priority, these security needs must be assessed not only in the context of Israel's relations with Palestine but also in a regional context. Thus, the establishment of a regional security regime and the elimination of weapons of mass destruction are necessary. It is particularly important for all contiguous states to cooperate against terrorist groups gaining access to such weapons. This is the common security threat that the regional states share and must work together to resolve.

When negotiations resume, the plan that was almost agreed upon at Camp David in July 2001 should be taken as the basis of the final treaty, subject to three modifications:

- First, eliminate the crisscrossing of Israeli security forces within the Palestinian state, as well as the garrisoning of Israeli forces in certain areas. This would infringe on Palestinian sovereignty and be seen as a continued symbol of Israeli occupation. Worse, it would create a target for anyone who would like to scuttle the peace by taking potshots at Israeli soldiers.

- Second, establish a new legal overseer for the holy sites in Jerusalem and beyond, such as Bethlehem and Hebron. These holy sites are the common heritage of humankind, and they must be protected and preserved for future generations. It should not be difficult to think of placing such areas under a council of religious leaders of all denominations, while each denomination administers its own sites without external interference. A municipal council could be established to provide services as well as security, much as home rule provides for many municipalities throughout the world. This would remove an

important hurdle in negotiations on Jerusalem and make it of lesser political significance in determining its boundaries so as to have the capitals of both states within it. Israel and a Palestinian state would, of course, be part of this special municipal arrangement.

- Third, establish a peace and reconciliation commission, like that of South Africa, to determine the facts and responsibilities arising out of the recent violence. A commission involving well-known international mediators as well as Palestinian and Israeli ones should determine the facts in each incident of violence and the responsibility of those who may have violated human rights. Then, of course, they must be prosecuted. This would serve as a catharsis to the national traumatic experiences of both societies and would dispel misconceptions that propaganda has established on both sides. Experience indicates that such traumatic experiences do not simply disappear after the signing of a political settlement. They tend to linger in the limbo of a people's consciousness, as well as in the memory of the survivors. The festering of injustice leads to revenge, and that can shatter peace and prevent reconciliation. If seeking peace, therefore, it is crucial to achieve justice.

The Talmud says: ^[L]_[SEP]"The world rests on three pillars: on truth, on justice and on peace."

A Talmudic commentary adds to this: "The three are really one. If justice is realized, truth is vindicated and peace results."