

Israel/Palestine: A Process of Peace or of Obstacles and Asymmetries?

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2012 is as good (or bad) a year as any other to take stock of what is commonly known as the “Peace Process,” and what in actual fact ought to be called the “Failed Peace Talks,” which date back to either 1947 or 1948. 1947 is the first point of reference, since it was in November of this year, under the historic Resolution 181 of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), that the UN voted in favour of dividing the territory of historical Palestine into two states; a Jewish one and an Arab/Palestinian one. This was fruit of the Peel Commission report, ordered by the recently created global body, after ruling out a single multi-faith and multi-ethnic state, which was as reasonable theoretically as it was unviable in practice. That is where it all began. The second point of reference is May 1948. This date marks the “creation of the State of Israel” on a vast common area, following the withdrawal of the United Kingdom and its troops. The UK had been administering the territory under the mandate of the (defunct) League of Nations since the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War. The following point is worth clarifying here, whatever today’s different political standpoints regarding the conflict may be: in November 1947 the recently created UN, which aspired to be a kind of “world government,” proposed two states, and a separate international administration for Jerusalem, the so-called *Corpus Separatum*, which would be under the sovereignty of neither state.

The question, which is still valid today, is why one of these parties (the Jewish community) accepted, and the other (the Palestinian community) refused. It should also be noted that in that same year the “Cold

War” erupted with all its force. So, when the Lebanese Camilla Chamoun (Lebanon was a full member of the UN) proposed a federal or confederal alternative, the United States and the Soviet Union did all they could – both within and outside of the UN – for Resolution 181 to be approved: two states, and that would be that. So, thirty-three states voted in favour (the United States, the Soviet Union and their respective allies), thirteen against (the Arab states plus India, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Greece and ... Cuba!), and ten abstained, led by the United Kingdom and Yugoslavia. In other words, right at the start of the Cold War there was a majority bipolar consensus in favour of the two states. The question that is asked time and time again, is now a hypothesis which cannot be proved, and one of political relevance. If the Palestinians had accepted, would the following sixty-five years have witnessed the same sequence of events? The hypothesis is valid because of another equally relevant consideration. If the solution to the conflict in its current state could be based on “who was there first” or, to put it another way, “who was right or who was dealt an injustice in 1947,” there would be no problem, but that is not the case. In the last sixty-five years there have been several wars between the states (or between Israel and some or several of the surrounding Arab states): 1949, 1956, 1967, 1973, 1982 and 2006; there have been two Intifadas, between 1987 and today; and there have been multiple “peace plans,” “peace initiatives” etc., etc. There have been various negotiations between the State of Israel and Arab states, and some have culminated in peace treaties: for example with Egypt, Jordan or Morocco. It has become a non-belligerent state with other Arab states over the years, and even with the Arab League. And with some, like Syria or Lebanon, technically it maintains a “ceasefire” or an agreement to cease hostilities, but without any kind of political

agreement. But there has been only one politically productive peace negotiation between Palestinians and Israelis (and which offered hope for a positive outcome): the “Oslo Accords,” signed in September 1993 in Washington, in what is now a historic photo with Clinton and Arafat on one side and Rabin on the other. That process lasted until its sudden collapse in September 2000 and the outbreak of the Second Intifada. Despite its failure, it hailed the return of the Palestinian leadership to part of Palestine, and the creation of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA).

So let us not be too liberal with the term “peace process”, and instead highlight when negotiations have been effective and when they have not. This is essential if we are to connect the two ends of the timeline of events and compare them. In 1947/1948, the situation regarding both sides’ expectations (the Jewish and Palestinian sides) was symmetrical regarding “what they did not have”: neither of the parties had a state, both parties aspired to having one, a territory of limited surface area was at stake, and resources (such as water) were also limited. Resolution 181 allocated 56% of the territory (but that included the vast, unpopulated Negev desert) for Israel, which at the time had a population of 498,000 Jews and 325,000 Palestinians; and 44% of the territory to the Palestinian State, with a population of 807,000 Palestinians and 10,000 Jews. If you do the maths, that is some 500,000 Jews and 1,100,000 Palestinians in total. Jerusalem, which according to the resolution was under direct international administration, under the UN, then had 100,000 Jews and around 120,000 Palestinians. Those figures are fuel for at least another six decades of dispute.

But while in 1947 the situation between the parties was symmetrical in terms of “what they did not have,” today it is totally different. The asymmetry is so tipped in Israel’s favour, that the actors in question (the two sides, relevant international and regional actors, the United Nations and the European Union) have a notably different framework of action. And here is where the *realpolitik* appears in its barest form, assuming that in situations of this nature politics is a competition for power; and even more so in the case of international conflicts. Is this situation fair? Not at first glance. On this basis, is the conflict likely to change its course and reinstate justice, or at least some kind of equity? Not necessarily. Not without an above-average political will and ability, which is not an applicable parameter today, in 2012. How

did we get here? To answer this, we need to take into account several factors, as well as the aforementioned final asymmetry.

The first factor is that between 1947 and 2012, the conflict has ultimately become bilateral between Israel and Palestine; the disputes between Israel and the surrounding Arab states – except Syria, where today there is also a bilateral dispute between two states, over a border dispute in the Golan Heights – are underway, or have at least been shelved next to one another. That could be an advantage or a drawback, depending on the circumstances, but it further accentuates the asymmetry of power in Israel’s favour.

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A second factor is that, since 1947 until today, the world, or rather the World Political System, has changed. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which began and developed in a bipolar world and under the logic of the Cold War, has progressed over the last twenty years in a post-bipolar and post-Cold War world. And in this second stage, in the post-bipolar world, the relative influence that the bipolar system used to have regarding the power balance in Middle Eastern conflicts, has simply vanished. For proof of this, look no further than the role Russia is playing, which is as shocking as it is isolated, in the popular uprising in Syria. It will not be an alleged (and non-existent) “neo-bipolar” world that has an effect on the Israeli government.

A third factor to take into account is that the post-bipolar world of the last twenty years, this alleged “new world order” that emerged from the demise of the Soviet Union and generated as many hopes around the world in its beginnings, as it did disappointments (Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan), has since become the worst possible framework for the situation. From order to disorder, from hope to disappointment, these twenty years encompass three very significant successive phases in the Israeli-Palestinian situation. The first, between 1993 and 2000, was a long process of negotiation, which,

with all its ups and downs, represented the only comparative attempt at reaching a definitive agreement – which, incidentally, was for two states and, at its most generous, offered the Palestinians more or less 60% of what the 1947 Partition plan had allocated them. The message was clear: there will be no more proposals like that made in 1947, or at Camp David in September 2000 (96% of the current West Bank and Gaza). The second stage, the extremely violent Second Intifada, (with five times the number of casualties as the First Intifada and also over a five-year period) marks the darkest moment of the conflict. The third stage, from 2005 until today, combines a wide range of factors. The so-called “International Community” (IC) has demanded that the Palestinians put an end to terrorism and hold democratic elections, which took place in 2005 and 2006. These elections were the most open and competitive of all the Arab world (together with some of those that have been held in Lebanon, and more recently, in Tunisia and Egypt). In 2005 Mahmoud Abbas won the presidential elections, and in 2006 Hamas were clear winners for parliament. Everyone knew the result, and the IC, with its entirely irrational logic, reached the conclusion that since Hamas had won, it would not recognise the results. How has Israel been able to hold three successive truces with Hamas, with the latter on the international lists of terrorist organisations (including the European Union’s)? Because they have been negotiated directly and/or with pre and post-Mubarak Egyptian mediation. So in the last six years, the conditions for halting (or, as Israel admitted, substantially decreasing) acts of terrorism or resistance (depending on the viewpoint) have been fulfilled, and parallel to the construction of the unilateral separation wall. The outbreaks of war have reappeared on isolated occasions (with operations against Gaza such as “Cast Lead” in 2008, or the assault on the international humanitarian aid flotilla in 2010, which incidentally was in international waters), and one element that has undoubtedly continued to grow is the expansion and construction of the settlements, throughout the West Bank and in the Jerusalem belt.

The fourth factor concerns the settlement construction, and has been dubbed the issue’s “litmus test.” One thing to bear in mind here is that between 2001 and 2008 the Bush administration played a key role within the structural framework of 9/11 and its global consequences. If those eight years are superimposed onto the sequence described above, it is

easier to understand the increase in the aforementioned asymmetry between Israel and Palestine. The “litmus test” was the change from the Bush administration to the Obama administration, Obama’s bold attempt (with his speech in Cairo at the beginning of his term) to reorder relations between the Arab and Muslim world and the US, and how his efforts ran aground precisely over the settlements issue. For every declaration made by Obama or Hillary Clinton, for every official visit to Israel, even of the vice-President Biden, the response of the Israeli government has been to order more settlements, even inside of Jerusalem’s Arab quarter; and we are talking about thousands of new flats, houses, apartments and infrastructures. The “litmus test” lies in the fact that by the third time this had occurred, everyone understood that when it comes to the US and Israel, the hierarchy of power, the supremacy of the strongest over the weakest, is not what it seems; instead the opposite is the case. Israel determines US policy with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and not vice versa. And to further complicate matters, in the US the conflict is much more a part of domestic than it is foreign policy, while in Israel it is solely and exclusively domestic policy.

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The fifth factor is more simple to outline: it is the sad list of alleged “peace processes,” which have not even reached the condition of “negotiation processes,” practically none of which has even been seriously considered by one or the other (or either) of the two sides. So in ten years we have been witness to an extreme case of “if we say that we are going to negotiate, in the end something will happen,” even if what happens is inadvertent, or down to the alignment of the planets. Starting with the failure of the Oslo Accords that followed the outbreak of the Second Intifada (September-October 2000), the list includes:

- The “Taba summit” (January 2001), which was a last-ditch attempt to relaunch what was agreed at Camp David in July of the previous year. The election of Sharon as Prime Minister in February

2001, however, put an end to an option that was already out of the question due to the ongoing Intifada. Needless to say, a few months later the events of 9/11 provided the perfect excuse to bury the remains of the defunct Camp David peace process.

- The Beirut Peace Plan, or the “Arab initiative” (of the Arab League at the request of Saudi Arabia) of 2002, which revived some of the traditional proposals of the previous thirty years: the return to the 1967 borders, mutual recognition, etc, etc, etc. This was no more than a mere statement, which Israel did not even respond to.
- The “Quartet” and the “Roadmap” of 2003/2004. This initiative will go down in history as a model and paradigm of false negotiation, from start to finish. Mahmoud Abbas and Ariel Sharon having breakfast in Camp David with George W. Bush as host; the photo is not a reconstruction of Camp David 1993, with Clinton, Arafat and Rabin. The proof: what happened in the following six years in both cases. What was most extravagant about the “Quartet” was its motley composition, which seemed to be designed to prevent it from reaching any common position, and above all, if that were to happen, to impose it by force (not necessarily military). It consisted of the United States, Russia, the United Nations and the European Union, which right from the beginning vetoed the presence of Arafat, who had to delegate his recently appointed Prime Minister, Mahmoud Abbas.
- One of the derivatives of the “Quartet” and its Roadmap was the appointment of a “special envoy.” There is not much to say about the first of these, Mr. Wolfhenson, former President of the World Bank, but in 2007, Tony Blair accepted the position. Over the years his overall performance could be perfectly summed up by his total inefficiency and lack of dedication in all but one area, which was covered extensively by the press in 2010 and 2011: his controversial con-

nections, through his position, with the Middle Eastern business world (see: *Courrier International* N° 1091, Sept/Oct 2011; *El País*, pag 8, 9 October 2011).

- There is also the Annapolis Conference in November 2007, which committed itself to delivering a Palestinian state in a period of one year. An agreement was reached in Annapolis to present a resolution regarding the matter before the UN Security Council, which was not even acknowledged by the Israeli opposition (weeks after the Conference came to an end).
- In the meantime, in 2008, for example, Hamas and Israel reached a bilateral agreement that lasted seven months, until the Israeli operation “Cast Lead,” in December 2008/January 2009.

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The conclusion is quite simple. In September 2011 the PNA decided to submit its request before the United Nations for full membership, while at the same time it looked for bilateral support from a considerable number of states, which in September 2011 stood at one hundred and thirty. But everyone knows about UN procedures. To be admitted as a full-member State, you need a favourable vote from the Security Council (which means without a veto from any of the five permanent members) and afterwards two thirds of the votes in the General Assembly. So since the UNSC does not have official decision times in its regulations, the request will remain where it is until further notice. For the time being and as meagre compensation, before the end of 2011 Palestine was accepted as a member of UNESCO. And for the time being, in 2012, sixty-five years after Resolution 181, that is how it stands.