

POLITICAL VISION

Paper of Understanding

Preamble

The International Women's Commission for a Just and Sustainable Palestinian-Israeli Peace is concerned that the formal negotiations on the resolution of the conflict are, once again, stagnated. Its members note that a mindset of despondency or escapism is fast overtaking both societies, along with a feeling of victimization without any constructive recourse. This is not a situation which is acceptable to any of us; it is not the future that we wish for our two societies.

The IWC is convinced that it is possible, by reexamining the present through a broad historical lens, to alter the dominant mindset that has hampered progress in the past and to revive hope for the achievement of a fair and durable settlement. This task is particularly urgent today, given the multiple threats to the implementation of a two-state solution, which we believe is the only viable alternative that can assure Palestinian self-determination, human security and the dignity of both peoples.

In order to revisit the conflict in an innovative and constructive manner and move forward towards its resolution, as women we firmly believe that it is no longer possible to ignore its roots. A human-based analysis of the fundamental components of the conflict and its progression exposes the gradual development of a climate that hampers achieving the goal of ending the occupation and creating a Palestinian state alongside Israel on the June 4th, 1967, borders.

The transition to a better future is dependent on the nurturing of a just narrative of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, one that takes into account the historical injustice suffered by the

Palestinian people. The role of women in this process cannot be exaggerated: the solidarity that can develop among women across the lines in conflict situations can offer inspiration and hope for their societies as a whole.

I. What is the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict About?

Two divergent narratives guide most Israeli and Palestinian views of past events, of the present impasse, and of future prospects. They have shaped the worldviews of successive generations and have become a powerful tool in molding and implementing policy. The acknowledgment of the narrative of the other, however painful, is an essential precondition for any mutual understanding.

For over a century, Jews and Palestinians have been engaged in a conflict consisting of three main components: territorial (struggles over land and national resources); human (clashes over identities and concepts of collective self-definition); and political (ongoing disputes over the legalities, legitimacies and control of the right to self-determination). Ideological, religious and absolutist definitions frequently associated with its roots contribute to the formation of a zero-sum approach which renders any resolution impossible.

Shifting regional and international environments have had an inordinate impact in shaping the distribution of land, people and power in the area, starting with the end of the Ottoman period, the Sykes-Picot treaty, the Balfour Declaration, the establishment of the British mandate in Palestine by the League of Nations, and World War II. The adoption of United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 in 1947, calling for the establishment of an Arab state and a Jewish state in mandatory Palestine, led directly to the 1948 war—one which brought fulfillment of the quest for the creation of the state of Israel, and the delay of expectations, expulsion, displacement and dispersal for the Palestinians. The 1947 military confrontations between Jews and Palestinians, the 1948 Israeli-Arab War and the 1949

armistice agreements left Israel in control of 78% of mandatory Palestine; the remaining 22% were under Jordanian and Egyptian control. Thus, the joy of independence for Israelis became the symbol of catastrophe for the Palestinians. Israelis must acknowledge their role in the displacement of Palestinians from their land and their responsibility in the creation of the refugee problem and their commitment to address this.

These divergent narratives were further reinforced in June, 1967, with the Israeli conquest of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip and the establishment of Israeli military overrule. The institutionalization of Israeli domination in virtually every sphere of Palestinian life in the occupied territories (including, among others, people, resources, the economy, social development and mobility) created a direct power asymmetry between the sides which had not existed before. This process compounded the inequities in matters of people, land and control, dating back to 1948. New systems of control were put in place, and further acts of displacement and replacement were set in motion with the illegal annexation of East Jerusalem, the expansion of its original boundaries by further annexation of territory and the launching of the government organized and/or assisted settler movement in the territories occupied by Israel after 1967 in defiance of international law and especially the Fourth Geneva Convention. Since then, the settler-colonial component of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has been magnified. It is compromising the viability of any two-state solution.

Nevertheless, in the following decades, the two-state option was revived. In 1988, The Palestinian Liberation Organization accepted the basic premise of the partition resolution. Both sides began to understand that in order to resolve the conflict, they would have to make a distinction between the dream of a homeland and the reality of statehood. But progress towards this goal was, if anything, infinitesimal.

The outbreak of the first *intifada* in 1987 and Israel's response resulted in deepening control over the movement of people and goods; it also led to the commencement of direct

talks between Israelis and Palestinians, first within the Madrid framework and then under the Oslo agreements. Close to a decade of negotiations yielded growing understanding of the need for a fair and durable two-state solution; it also witnessed increased settlement activity and additional economic and social restrictions on Palestinians. The gap between the promise of a political settlement and the reality of deprivation and enclosure led to the breakdown of Palestinian-Israeli talks and the outbreak of the second *intifada* in the latter part of 2000.

Despite the Arab League Initiative of March 2002 (reaffirmed in Riyadh in March 2007) and the promulgation of the US-initiated and Quartet-led Roadmap a year later, the Second Lebanon war and the continued consolidation of the occupation have contributed to the rapid regionalization of the conflict in the last two years.

Asymmetry is the most dominant characteristic in the progression of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to date; it is manifest in the patently unequal distribution of land and political control as well as in the immense gaps in human conditions and prospects for development. The divergent narratives generated by the substantive, spatial and temporal evolution of the conflict make it even more difficult to bridge the cultural and experiential gaps generated over the years. This built-in inequality affects men and women differentially. A women's perspective assists in realistically identifying the roots of the conflict; it is also helpful in highlighting its consequences, thereby providing much-needed insights into its resolution.

II. Where Are We Now?

The conditions of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict today and the climate that fuels it underscore, in the absence of successful negotiations, the growing disparities that are omnipresent. The occupation is not only an objective condition; it is highly personalized. It filters down into every aspect of Palestinian life, adversely affecting their hopes and aspirations. It subsequently prevents Israelis from achieving their long-term goals as well.

The absence of human security for all perpetuates gender inequality and makes the challenge of reaching a just solution even more pressing.

The present situation is one of growing deterioration on the ground, coupled with even greater suspicion and acrimony between the two communities. The institutionalization of the occupation under the guise of separation has become the norm. In territorial terms, expropriation and creeping annexation continue apace. Settlement and outpost expansion are facilitated by land expropriation, roads and bypass routes and, most significantly, by the completion of the separation wall. In human terms, this means further dispossession and dispersal for Palestinians. A demographic transformation is taking place as a result of the growth and expansion of settlements, the building of the wall, land dispossession, restrictions on access and mobility, deteriorating educational and social services, prohibitions on family reunification and additional constraints on “residency rights.”

These actions have led to the bifurcation of the occupied Palestinian territory not only through the separation of Gaza from the West Bank and of key areas of the West Bank from each other, but also through the purposeful geographic fragmentation within these enclaves that divides Palestinians from Palestinians.

In legal and political terms, the massive augmentation of Israeli military forces in the West Bank on the one hand, and the Israeli unilateral disengagement from Gaza on the other, has only accentuated the imbalance between Israelis and Palestinians. It is even more difficult to redress this imbalance because of the power divide in Palestine and the destabilization of the Israeli political system.

The decision to disengage from Gaza, made outside the context of negotiations, and its subsequent isolation by Israeli control of all access points, land and sea, (including the refusal to grant safe passage to the West Bank), has created an atmosphere of despair and deteriorating conditions on the ground. Notwithstanding this de facto continued Israeli

occupation of Gaza, “disengagement” was accompanied by further expansion of settlements in the West Bank.

These conditions are exacerbated by a pervasive sense of despondency and loss of hope. The tightening vise on Palestinian existence has generated either despair or escapism as a response to the prevalent feeling of personal and national victimization. Israelis, in turn, suffering from an ongoing sense of vulnerability despite their superior might, are fast forfeiting their belief in the possibility of a solution and, where possible, disengaging from its realities. Women, more than others, continue to suffer its ramifications. These differential effects on the minds and physical existence resulting from the prolonged conflict make the quest for gender parity an integral part of the solution to the conflict, just as the resolution of the conflict is key to gender equity in both communities.

III. Where Are the Negotiations?

The negotiations launched at the Annapolis summit in November 2007 were meant to fundamentally alter this state of affairs. The talks being conducted between Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and President Mahmoud Abbas, between Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Ahmed Qurei, and the technical discussions taking place among specialized professional teams have effectively stalled. From the outset, these negotiations were flawed. Rather than address the existing asymmetry of power, they embraced it. They remained largely bilateral when international intervention was required and third party arbitration was critical. They did not bring a halt to violence and to its civilianization and personalization on both sides. And they did not stop the continued colonization of the West Bank and the de-development of Palestinian society.

The lack of progress in the negotiations is a function of more deep-seated factors as well. First, it is the direct outcome of a dominant Israeli mindset which seeks to dictate the

results of negotiations both by the constant creation of new facts on the ground and by an unwillingness to go the necessary mile towards resolution. This patronizing—some say colonialist—frame of mind has time and again prevented accommodation. Second, the current state of affairs has been fueled by a growing Palestinian perception that Israelis only understand violence, a view that has received support from extremist forces in the region. This mindset has substantially weakened the peace camp in Israel and undermined its—and that of its Palestinian counterparts—message of moderation.

Third, the political situation in Israel, fraught with instability and insecurity, has made it much more difficult for leaders to take courageous positions and to mobilize support for the actions necessary to reach a lasting agreement. The absence of tangible improvements on the ground and in negotiations is undermining the Palestinian leadership. Trust in leaders on both sides has diminished, albeit for very different reasons.

Fourth, changes in the regional context in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq and the Second Lebanon war have changed the parameters of the conflict. These developments in the opening years of the present century have been marked by increased activity on the part of non-state actors and the rise of extremism and violence, hampering regional development, democracy and the rule of law. These developments have also injected religious and ideological dimensions into the conflict which have created serious internal divisions and severely complicated efforts at resolution. The current negotiations, which continue to ignore the Arab Peace Initiative, have not taken these shifts into account.

Fifth, the international involvement in this round of efforts to resolve the conflict has been far less than what is required under present circumstances. The international mobilization of resources for humanitarian and capacity building measures to the Palestinians are not linked systematically to progress on the ground or to the negotiating process. Direct third party arbitration is sorely lacking.

Sixth, wide gaps remain on key substantive issues. The question of boundaries is in dispute. There is no convergence on the future of Jerusalem as two capitals for two states. The dismantlement of settlements within the boundaries of the future Palestinian state is still under discussion. And the critical question of Palestinian refugees remains unresolved because of an unwillingness to address the deep roots of the conflict. As IWC, we challenge policymakers to think outside the box on these issues.

Finally, elusive factors contribute to the stagnant status quo. The widespread lack of belief in the possibility of a political settlement, even when there is agreement on its broad contours, has itself prevented progress. Once again, the loss of faith in the prospects of a just solution impedes its realization.

At this juncture, the groundwork for a two-state solution is being lost. The physical conditions for the two-state paradigm have been compromised. The psychological mindset for its actualization has been undermined. The political and international mechanisms for its implementation are eroding. And in the process, Israelis and Palestinians, men and women, are being condemned to a future which belies their needs and aspirations.

IV. What Are the Alternatives?

The two-state solution remains the most appealing choice for Israelis and Palestinians, both individually and collectively. Each and every alternative scenario leads to a bleaker, less sustainable future. These options emerge mostly out of inaction rather than conscious choice. For this reason, the urgency of concluding a lasting agreement has become even more pressing.

There are, at the moment, four obvious alternatives to the two-state scenario. The first is the perpetuation of the situation. In this scenario, it is likely that there will be a complete institutionalization of separate, non-contiguous enclaves and a total confinement of

Palestinian mobility and therefore the further deterioration of daily life. This alternative will be accompanied by the breakdown of order and the breakout of even greater violence.

A second, related, scenario envisages the total separation of Gaza from the West Bank, thereby quashing Palestinian hopes for self-determination. Such an alternative does not begin to respond to the human, let alone political, roots of the conflict. Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem must continue to constitute the unified political, geographic, and economic entity of the future Palestinian state.

A third outcome of diplomatic paralysis is destruction. This alternative focuses on the intensification of armed confrontation, on irregular wars which include non-state actors and on the outbreak of more widespread regional conflagrations. Needless to say, this prospect is as catastrophic as it is disheartening, especially for women and children.

A fourth possibility, the one-state scenario, is often presented as a palliative to these alternatives. In fact, this scenario is a consequence of inaction. The single state in its democratic, bi-national form is not an option at this juncture. In fact, the one-state alternative threatens to perpetuate and deepen the occupation. More significantly, it will broaden and consolidate the existing asymmetry.

The two-state solution, therefore, remains the best among a spate of worrisome alternatives. It offers a channel for comprehensive peace and stability in line with the Arab Peace Initiative. Only two states living side by side can ensure the construction of strong and vibrant societies, prevent the continuation of the debilitating brain drain, and bring Israeli and Palestinian knowhow to their full fruition.

The two-state solution is also in the best interests of women. It ensures better protection against repression, discrimination and violence. It conforms to the majority aspirations of each community at this point in time. And it provides the best response to the climate of fear and hostility that continues to plague the region.

V. How Can We Proceed At This Time?

This analysis highlights the need to break traditional patterns of negotiations and interactions between Israelis and Palestinians by revisiting the nature of the conflict, underlining the deepening asymmetries it has yielded, and highlighting its iniquitous consequences. The IWC believes that this requires a lucid presentation of objectives, a rectification of past mistakes and vigorous steps to ending the conflict in the immediate future.

The purpose of negotiations today is to achieve several interrelated goals that are essential to any lasting peace agreement: the termination of the occupation in all its forms; the achievement of self-determination for Palestinians by the creation of a robust Palestinian state alongside Israel; the realization of Palestinian rights and sovereignty over East Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state; a just and fair solution to the question of Palestinian refugees in accordance with UNGA Resolution 194 ensuring refugees rights; and the realization of a lasting solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict within the framework of the Arab Peace Initiative.

Progress towards these objectives depends on avoiding the mistakes of the past. These include jettisoning any form of intermediate steps. They imply averting any foot-dragging: immediate, intense and ongoing talks must be pursued without further delay to reach the objectives cited above.

Most significantly, the two peoples cannot afford the absence of active international oversight while negotiations take place. International arbitration is imperative to assure accountability and to provide essential protection. This means that Israel cannot continue to systematically violate international conventions and ignore international humanitarian law; Israel must be held accountable for its actions. It is also self-evident that Palestinians have the right to resist the occupation but that there will be zero tolerance of attacks against

civilians. Only through such mechanisms will it be possible to stabilize conditions on the ground and bring them in line with the needs of productive negotiations.

Specific steps are required at this critical crossroads. Besides the assurance of human security at all stages and consistent, internationally monitored conduct, it is also necessary that both sides agree to the presence of international protection forces for the Palestinians and monitoring and arbitration on the ground to fulfill these goals. Women, in particular, are in need of such guarantees. The obligations of the international community in this respect can neither be ignored nor exaggerated.

The political process, therefore, must be revived in a dramatically different atmosphere, one that is conducive to achieving positive outcomes. It must be inclusive in every respect: substantively, it must deal with all the fundamental components of the conflict; socially, it must strive to include broad segments of each society; psychologically, it must maintain transparency; and pragmatically, it must be efficacious.

The IWC is convinced that the inclusion of women, the under-acknowledged victims of this conflict, during this transition phase is vital to promoting the creation of just, equitable and democratic societies in Israel and Palestine in the future. The task of nation-building is an integral part of any just solution.

VI. What Can the IWC Do Now?

The strategies of the IWC must now focus on ameliorating the deteriorating situation on the ground and stimulating veritable and conclusive negotiations.

Specific measures include:

- Promotion of activities to redress the growing asymmetries.
- Insistence on monitoring and the adoption of procedures to guarantee human security.

- Presentation of an ongoing challenge to prevailing power structures and their underlying mindsets.
- Formulation and dissemination of the IWC's gendered approach to the analysis and resolution of the conflict.
- Mobilization of international and local support and the activation of IWC members to promote the objectives of a just two-state solution.
- Advancement of an increased women's role in negotiations and insistence on the inclusion of gender perspectives at every stage of the process.

Endorsed by the IWC all-member meeting
30 August 2008