

# The Despair of Zion

*Any effort to bring peace between Israelis and Palestinians must reckon with the fact that bitter experience has taught many Israelis to doubt that their foes want a lasting concord.*

BY WALTER REICH

MEETING A FRIEND IN A COFFEE SHOP IN AN OLD Jerusalem neighborhood, once the home of Jews who had escaped Germany before the Holocaust, I asked him what he wanted most in life. One of the giants of Israel's academic and intellectual life, my friend has challenged some of the central tenets of his country's national narrative but is deeply committed to the necessity and justice of Israel's existence as a Jewish state.

With no hesitation, but with obvious despair, he answered, "I want my children to emigrate."

Just then his daughter happened to stop by with her husband, greeting her father with a warm hello before hurrying off. He shrugged, and said, "She doesn't want to go. What can I do?"

My friend's despair is shared, in one way or another, by many of the Israelis with whom I've spoken. It's a despair based largely on what they believe is a realistic assessment of Israel's situation in the world and of the ultimate intentions of many, and probably most, Palestinians.

To be sure, lots of Israelis don't share this despair,

don't talk about it, or use every coping mechanism they can to set it aside and live a normal life. Yet it's a feeling that, at some level and to some degree, permeates all things in much of the population, and that has frequently emerged in the many conversations I've had in recent years with Israelis.

American officials in past administrations have tried—sometimes, as one of them put it recently, religiously, and often blindly and self-deceptively—to broker an Israeli-Palestinian peace treaty. But the failure of each effort has deepened Israeli despair.

The Obama administration, too, seems intent on brokering such a peace treaty. For the administration to have any chance to succeed, it will not only have to show Israelis that it understands their despair but convince them that the kind of treaty it wants Israel to accept will be worth the cost because it will result in a real peace—one that will actually last, that's less threatening than the situation they're now in, and that will truly and finally end the conflict with the Palestinians. Few Israelis still fantasize that some day Palestinians will accept them with any warmth as neighbors; but they want to live—and to be, at least, left alone.

Certainly, there's much in their country's experience that provokes in Israelis pride rather than

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A family member grieves at the funeral service for eight Jewish yeshiva students killed in a 2008 attack by a Palestinian gunman.

despair. After all, following two millennia of forced dispersions, during which they prayed three times a day to return to Zion, and during which some Jews persisted in living there, they've finally returned, so that today half the Jews in the world—a population much diminished by the Holocaust—live in the place from which their forebears were exiled.

And they've accomplished a lot there. They've revived a language—Hebrew—for everyday use that, throughout their years in exile, was used primarily

for religious and literary purposes. They've created a modern country and a democratic society in a vast zone of despotic rule. Jews who were once utterly defenseless in foreign lands and repeatedly massacred—most recently in the greatest massacre of all, the Holocaust—can now defend themselves. And, despite its small population—some 7.5 million, about 80 percent of them Jews—Israel has become a dynamo of scientific and cultural innovation.

Yet the challenges that face Israel are immense—

and growing. Increasingly, Israelis are convinced that no concessions they make to the Palestinians will ever be enough—that each concession will be followed by another demand, that each new demand that isn't conceded will be a pretext for more violence, and that each response to that violence will provoke international condemnations of Israel for using disproportionate force, no matter what forewarnings are given and what precautions are taken

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to prevent civilian casualties. Israelis watch as efforts are made around the world to demonize, isolate, and delegitimize their country. They're stunned especially by the successful strategy, employed by Palestinians and their allies, of having Israel labeled an "apartheid state." They feel beset by what they see as biased media campaigns and human rights organizations that focus obsessively on Israel even as they ignore massive violations elsewhere. They feel increasingly and unfairly under attack by, among others, a Europe with a growing Muslim population, the United Nations, the political Left on university campuses and elsewhere, and even some Jews around the world, including some in Israel, who find themselves embarrassed that the Jewish state has used military force.

**T**o be successful, those who want to broker an Israeli-Palestinian peace—one that lasts more than a few weeks or months—will have to be able to glimpse the world through Israeli eyes. They'll have to understand the beliefs and fears that are the sources of much Israeli despair—and take them into account no less than they take into account the sources of Palestinian despair. Ten of these beliefs and fears seem particularly salient:

**The Palestinians will never accept the existence of Israel, and systematically teach their children that they must never do so, either.**

It's this belief, probably more than any other, that causes Israeli despair.

Israelis have grown accustomed to being pilloried in the most crude and violent terms in Palestinian mosques. And they've grown accustomed to media controlled by the Palestinian Authority in the

West Bank that regularly undermine the readiness to accept Israel alongside a future Palestinian state—that glorify suicide bombers, quote Muhammad as saying that Jews must be killed, accuse Israelis of poisoning and spreading AIDS among

Palestinians, deny that the Holocaust happened, claim that Jews never had a history in the land and that there was never any Temple in Jerusalem, and insist that Jews should leave the area and go back to their "original" homelands—Europe and Ethiopia.

Israelis might feel reassured that peace is possible if it were promoted in the Palestinian Authority's education system; even if the current Palestinian generation isn't ready to accept the Jewish state, maybe a future one will. But they know that Palestinian students study maps in their textbooks on which Israel doesn't exist and watch television programs aimed at young people that identify cities in Israel as being part of Palestine.

Moreover, the *other* Palestinian territory—Gaza—is governed by a group, Hamas, that is forthright in declaring that it will fight until Israel is gone, and that promotes this ideology in every way it can in its own media and education system. Even if the Palestinian Authority were to foster the ideal of coexistence among its students, what about the students in Gaza?

**Palestinians will always demand more concessions until there is no Israel.**

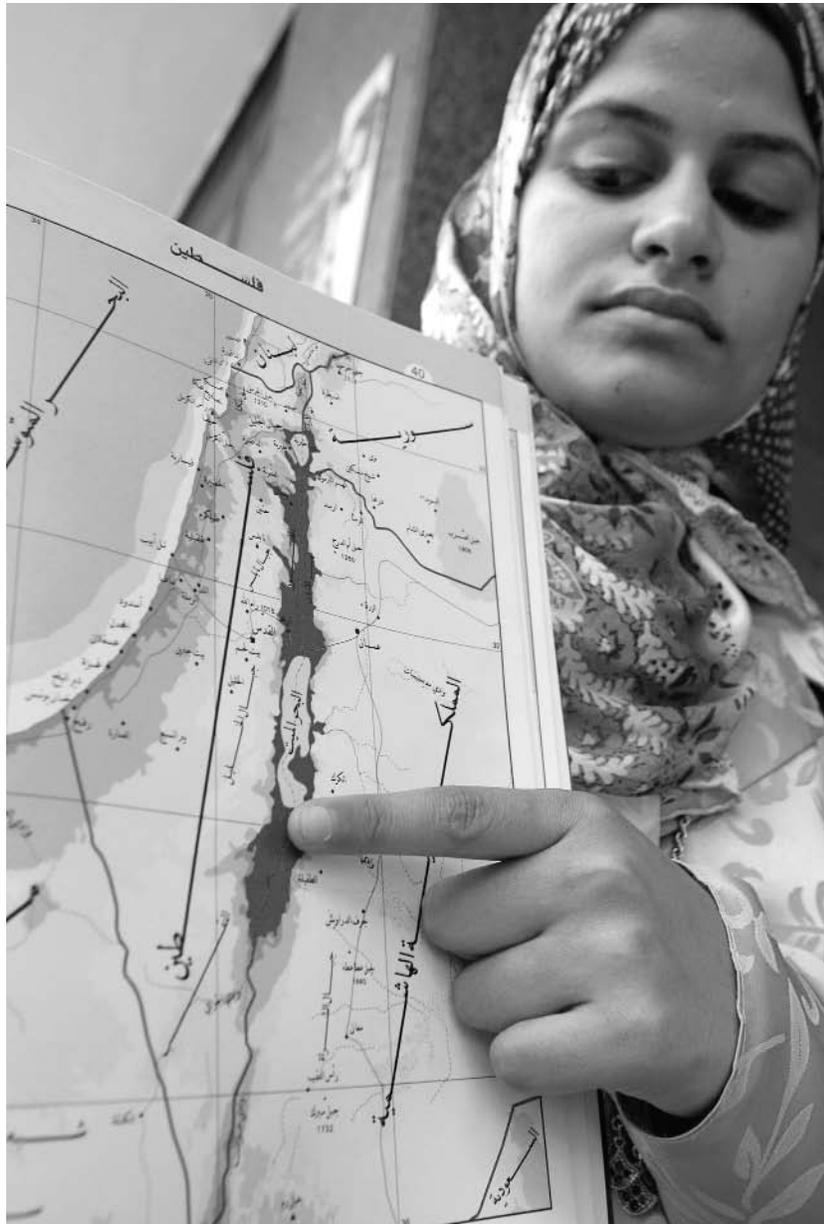
This is a conclusion many Israelis have reached as a result of many years of failed peacemaking.

After the Oslo Peace Accords, signed in 1993 on

the White House lawn, the Israeli consensus, fragile but determined, and led by Yitzhak Rabin, was that peace would be painful, would require massive concessions involving land and the control of Jerusalem, and would require the removal of most settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. But for most Israelis, these concessions were worth the achievement of a real and lasting peace.

After years of Israeli buses being blown up, after the refusal by Yasir Arafat, the Palestinian leader, to accept a peace in which nearly all of the West Bank and Gaza would become a Palestinian state, and after Arafat's successor, Mahmoud Abbas, refused concessions that were even more generous, many Israelis concluded that no concession would ever be enough. Always there was an insistence that the Palestinian refugees—including the millions of children, grandchildren, and other descendants of the original refugees from the 1948 fighting—would be able to “return” to the homes of the actual refugees in what became Israel. For most Israelis this is a strategy aimed at ending the Jewish state, and is the poison pill of Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy.

**Palestinians attack Israel from behind civilian human shields, but any response by Israel, however careful, that harms those civilians is condemned, while the tactic itself, which is a crime of war, is ignored.**



Throughout the Arab world, there is no Israel on maps used to instruct the young, only Palestine.

Israelis have concluded that this new form of warfare has undercut the effectiveness of the military strength on which they long relied. They know they have a powerful army—the Israel Defense Forces, or IDF—that faces, in the cases of the Palestinians and Hezbollah in Lebanon, adversaries that lack tanks or planes. But Israelis have discovered that their military superiority is blunted, even useless, when their

adversaries are willing to use the very people whose cause they claim to champion as shields behind which to fire rockets. That's what happened during Israel's three-week incursion into Gaza in the winter of 2008–09, which it launched after being bombarded by thousands of rockets. And that's what happened during the 2006 war with Hezbollah, the Palestinians' ally on Israel's northern border, which hid its rockets in schools, mosques, and hospitals, so that Israel couldn't target the rockets without also destroying those schools, mosques, and hospitals—and killing civilians. Like the United States and other countries fighting in the Middle East, Israel doesn't know how to fight such a war. And when it tries, it's accused of war crimes. Israelis worry that the military they built to defend their country can't do it without bringing upon Israel international condemnation.

**Increasingly, the military war against Israel, in which Israel can defend itself, is being replaced by a public relations war, in which Israel invariably loses.**

As frustrating as it is for Israelis to fight an enemy that uses its own population as human shields, it's even more frustrating to fight an enemy that designs every encounter to turn into a public relations disaster for Israel. In May, when Israel tried to stop the Free Gaza flotilla—which included militant Islamist activists ready for a fight—it fell into a trap. If it allowed the blockade of Gaza to be breached, then Hamas might get more rockets to shoot at Israel. But if it tried to stop the ships, it would risk a confrontation that would further damage its reputation. It risked that confrontation, was met with violence, ended up killing activists, and created an anti-Israel furor in the world news media. Now, more such flotillas—and more PR-aimed provocations—are surely coming.

**The worldwide campaign to delegitimize Israel is selective and hypocritical, but is finding increasing support.**

The growth of anti-Israel sentiment around the world has left Israelis feeling increasingly isolated. Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East, and a great number of Israelis see themselves as liberals.

They know that, in the last century, the spasm of murder aimed at annihilating all Jews in Europe and anywhere else they could be found was carried out on the basis of a rightist ideology. So they're amazed that so much antagonism toward Israel is expressed by intellectuals on the political left. They don't understand why they're attacked for even minor confrontations with Palestinians or for erecting checkpoints to deter suicide bombers, while far more extensive human rights violations are glossed over. Ignored, for example, is the gross violation of the most basic human rights, to the point of enslavement, of the half of the population of Saudi Arabia made up of women, or the banning of worship there that isn't Muslim. Ignored, too, are the populations that lack basic freedoms—in Syria, say, or Iran, or Sudan, or Somalia, as well as the victims in Chechnya, Tibet, and Kurdistan.

Moreover, some of the greatest human rights violators in the world—most recently Libya—sit on the UN Human Rights Council, whose condemnations, Israelis note, are relentlessly focused on Israel. Permanent bodies in the UN, several with large staffs, have been established solely to advocate on behalf of Palestinians, such as the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and Other Arabs of the Occupied Territories, and the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, and the Division for Palestinian Rights.

Israelis find the worldwide anti-Israel campaigns by other groups isolating and frightening. Critics have tried to persuade academic and professional organizations to sever ties with Israeli groups. In Britain, the University and College Union, an educators' organization, passed a boycott resolution last year only to be warned by lawyers that such a boycott would be illegal. Others have campaigned to get universities and churches to remove companies that do business with Israel from their endowment portfolios. On a few occasions, Israeli scientists have even been denied visas to countries that were hosting professional conclaves. In June, Spain's Federation of Lesbians, Gays, Transsexuals, and Bisexuals banned Israel from participating in its gay pride parade in Madrid—even though Israel is one of the few coun-

tries in the Middle East in which homosexuality is protected, while homosexuals elsewhere in the region face execution.

**The most vicious canard of all—that Israel is a Nazi state—is, with increasing frequency, hurled against the Jewish state.**

Fighting between Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank in 2002 provoked a chorus of accusations by Europeans that the Israelis were doing to the Palestinians exactly what Nazi Germany did to the Jews. “What is happening,” the late Portuguese Nobel laureate José Saramago said, “is a crime that may be compared to Auschwitz.”

Later, during the fighting in Gaza in the winter of 2008–09, demonstrators carried signs with slogans such as “Israel: The Fourth Reich” and “Stop the Nazi Genocide in Gaza.” Hugo Chávez, the Venezuelan president, said, “The Holocaust, that is what is happening right now in Gaza.” And a Norwegian foreign diplomat wrote, “The grandchildren of Holocaust survivors from World War II are doing to the Palestinians exactly what was done to them by Nazi Germany.”

For many Israelis, who are Holocaust survivors or their descendants, such accusations provoke horror and shock. Either these allies of the Palestinians have a profound misunderstanding of what the Holocaust was or are hurling the most vicious canard they can against the Jewish state. Some Israelis are convinced that, by accusing Israelis of being Nazis, Europeans are trying to free their continent from the burden of its history. After all, if Jews in Israel are no different from Nazi murderers, then the continent’s history can be seen as normal. For some Israelis, in fact, this European phenomenon represents anti-Semitism’s return.

**Even if there is a two-state solution, what will happen the day after tomorrow?**

This question keeps many Israelis awake at night. The main peace plan to end the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict aims at a “two-state solution”—an Israel behind its pre-1967 borders alongside a Palestinian state in what is now the West Bank and, if Hamas can somehow be converted or defeated, Gaza. But, Israelis ask, why would any sane person, Israeli or otherwise, believe that, two weeks or two months after a Palestinian state were to come into being—a state that would abut the length of Israel’s narrow waist as well as Jerusalem—rockets wouldn’t be flying over its border and blowing up in every Israeli city and airport?

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And why not? Even if Hamas were to retain control of Gaza and refuse to participate in a treaty with Israel, meaning that the Palestinian state would consist only of what is now the West Bank, and even if that state’s leaders wanted peace at least as long as it would take to establish their country, wouldn’t there also be, in that state, Hamas members and others who didn’t want peace, who had never wanted it, and who would use it as a springboard for launching attacks so as to achieve the ultimate objective of eliminating Israel? Wasn’t that Yasir Arafat’s goal even before the Six-Day War? Isn’t that Hamas’s goal now? And if the leaders of the Palestinian state who didn’t want war got in the way, wouldn’t they be ignored—or killed?

The Israelis who have this nightmare cite a small experiment to buttress their fear—Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza in 2005. This action was followed by a coup in which Hamas brutally killed members of its Palestinian rival, Fatah, took over Gaza, and continually lobbed rockets into Israel.

In this nightmare of rockets bombarding Israel from the Palestinian state, that state’s Hezbollah allies in Lebanon launch their own war of rockets against Israel. In 2008, Hezbollah’s rockets had enough range

to target Israel's north. Now that Hezbollah's store of rockets has been vastly upgraded and expanded, it can target nearly all Israeli cities.

With tens of thousands of rockets and missiles flying out of the Palestinian state and Lebanon—and, in this nightmare, from Gaza as well—it might be impossible for Israelis to live anywhere other than in bomb shelters, and the devastation would be immense. But if Israel were to respond by attacking the sources of those rockets in the newly declared Palestine, this time they would be attack-

probability of such an attack significant, especially if Palestinians and Hezbollah are firing rockets into Israel, and Israel is responding.

**The idea is spreading that U.S. support for Israel is the root cause of America's problems in the Middle East.**

In the years after 9/11, the most common American explanation for Islamic terrorism was poverty. Even after numerous studies proved that this wasn't true, this

reason continues to be cited by politicians and academics.

Now, Israelis fear, their country's conflict with the Palestinians is becoming the simple—and false—explanation for America's unpopularity in the Middle East. When they heard President Barack Obama remark at an April press

**ISRAELIS' CHOICE IS between the physical destruction wrought by war and the moral destruction wrought by dominating a people that would destroy them.**

ing not a territory or a faction but a sovereign member of the UN, one that would call on—and instantly receive—the support not only of its fellow Muslim states but also the world at large, including most of Europe. And since the same tactic that was used in Gaza and Lebanon would no doubt be used in Palestine—rockets fired from hospitals, schools, and mosques—any retaliation would provoke multiple critical reports, from UN bodies as well as human rights groups, of war crimes that would make the excoriations of Israel in the Goldstone Commission report, which was issued after the fighting in Gaza, sound, by comparison, like allegations of traffic violations.

**Meanwhile, Iran is readying its nuclear warheads.**

This is, for Israelis, the most frightening scenario of all. They have no doubt—and intelligence services around the world tend to confirm—that Iran will have one or more usable nuclear weapons within a couple of years. Reportedly, Iran already has enough nuclear material to enable it, once the material is purified, to make two weapons. Israelis take seriously the Iranian argument that it's worth being damaged by an Israeli counter-strike if, in the process, the Zionist entity, as well as all or most of its Jews, are destroyed. They consider the

conference that regional conflicts such as that in the Middle East end up “costing us significantly in terms of both blood and treasure,” they assumed from the context that he was referring to America's support for Israel. In the view of these Israelis, no one who understands radical Islam imagines that America would cease being its target even if the United States were to cut off all ties with Israel—indeed, even if Israel were to disappear.

As some Israelis see it, the naive notion that their country is a root cause of the problems the United States is experiencing in the Middle East has been adopted by a large number of Americans—and America might, as a result, abandon the Jewish state.

**Not pursuing a two-state solution leaves only a one-state solution—an alternative that is profoundly anti-Zionist.**

If a two-state solution is seen by most Israelis as existentially dangerous and possibly unattainable, then all that's left is maintenance of the status quo. And Israelis understand that an endless status quo could result in a one-state solution—a state in which they would be politically dominant but demographically a minority. The Zionist dream of a democracy of Jews in



A rocket streaks toward Israel from the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip in January 2009, amid an Israeli incursion designed to end the steady rain of attacks.

the land of their people's birth would be destroyed. The vast majority of Israelis I know don't want to have power over the lives of Palestinians. But deeper than their empathy with the Palestinians is their desperate hope to survive. What Israelis see before them is a choice between the physical destruction wrought by war and the moral destruction wrought by forever dominating a people that, if allowed, would destroy them. For these Israelis, it's a choiceless choice.

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Which makes it easy to understand why my Zionist friend, who believes in the justice of a Jewish state, wants his children to emigrate.

Which makes it necessary that the Obama administration address my friend's despair if it hopes to broker a real and lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

And which leads me, as his friend—and as someone whose murdered family in Europe probably would have remained alive had Israel existed seven decades ago—to my own state of Zionist despair.

The United States' attempts at making peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have failed for many reasons. If the Obama administration really wants to broker a treaty—one that has any chance of yielding a lasting peace—then it will have to understand Israel's nightmares even as it recognizes Palestinian yearnings, and find ways of addressing them. And it had better do so soon. ■