

IN THE SHADOW OF ARIEL SHARON: THE MISSING PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Roxanna Benoit and Geoff Norquay



In this letter from Israel, two Ottawa policy consultants take close-up view of the intractable nature of the issues dividing Israelis and Palestinians — beginning, literally, with Ariel Sharon's security fence. While it is universally detested on the Palestinian side, the fence has also resulted in a dramatic reduction in suicide bombings. "Those Canadians who believe Sections 91 and 92 of our Constitution are complex," write Roxanna Benoit and Geoff Norquay, "might want to contemplate the governance of the Middle East." For the Palestinians, it comes down to land, and to the Israelis it is about security, in a region where both are in short supply.

Dans cette lettre d'Israël, deux consultants politiques d'Ottawa examinent le caractère insoluble des problèmes qui divisent Israéliens et Palestiniens et dont témoigne concrètement le mur de sécurité érigé par Ariel Sharon. Une mesure unanimement condamnée du côté palestinien, qui a néanmoins entraîné une baisse radicale des attentats suicides à la bombe. « Les Canadiens qui jugent complexes les sections 91 et 92 de leur Constitution devraient se pencher sur la gouvernance du Moyen-Orient », écrivent Roxanna Benoit et Geoff Norquay. Une région où les Palestiniens en quête de territoire et les Israéliens en quête de sécurité se heurtent à une pénurie de terres et de paix.

As he lies in a coma in the long-term care unit of an Israeli medical centre, Ariel Sharon still casts a huge shadow over his country and the Middle East.

Front-line soldier in three wars between 1948 and 1973, defence minister during the 1982 Lebanon war, and later a cabinet minister in several governments, Sharon as prime minister (2001-06) broke the mould of contemporary Israeli politics in several ways:

- Spurred by the continuing cycle of suicide bombings initiated from Palestinian settlements, he took the decision in 2001 to build the security fence that now separates most of the West Bank from Israel.
- In a move similar to Nixon's opening to China, he convinced the country of the need to expel more than 9,000 Israelis from 21 settlements in Gaza and to withdraw the Israeli's Defense Forces (IDF) from the territory, a process completed in September 2005.
- Finally, in November 2005, he abandoned the Likud Party he had led to power and created a new party, Kadima (Forward), to unite those dedicated to his policy of unilateral disengagement, removing Israeli settlements from Palestinian territory and fixing Israel's borders with a prospective Palestinian state.

Eighteen months after the stroke that removed him from the scene, the success of Sharon's three initiatives is at best mixed:

- The security fence is an all-but-completed reality, snaking between and around West Bank Palestinian communities and Israeli settlements close to the Green Line, the 1949 armistice line that separates Israel from the West Bank. The fence is divisive, disruptive and hugely expensive, but it has also effectively ended the suicide bombings that took hundreds of Israeli lives prior to its construction.
- Both the settlers and the IDF are long gone from the Gaza Strip, but in mid-June, Hamas and Fatah factions squared off in a bloody civil war that resulted in Hamas taking complete control of the territory. The Palestinian Authority, the interim Palestinian self-governance body created by the Oslo Accords, was powerless to stop the carnage. Israelis now face a territory ruled by terrorists roughly 60 miles from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Needless to say, negotiations on a possible Palestinian state are on hold.
- Sharon's Kadima initiative is in ruins and his party's future prospects are very much in doubt. His successor

as Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, has been terminally weakened by the scathing Winograd report on his government's bungled sortie into Lebanon last summer. Olmert's coalition is coming unglued and will very likely need reinforcements to survive.

These developments are simply today's chapters of the history that is the region's heritage and burden. And for Canadian visitors to the Middle East in the spring of 2007, they bring a clearer perspective to our cur-

To visit the Golan Heights is to understand once and for all the advantage to those who hold this height of land and the vulnerability of those who don't. On the Israeli side, the plateau rises 1,700 metres straight up from the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee and the floors of Israel's northern valleys. The view is commanding and breathtaking; the Mediterranean is off in the distance to the west. From here a missile can reach just about anywhere in the region, and certainly any part of Israel, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. Iraq is east of Jordan and Syria, and during the first Gulf War, 39 of Saddam Hussein's Scud missiles reached Tel Aviv and Haifa.

rent disputes over federal-provincial equalization formulas, or concerns about minuscule changes in the security arrangements for our undefended border with the United States.

In fact, geography and the proximity of borders serve as a useful starting point in understanding the obvious differences between Israel and Canada, as well as the complexity of just some of the challenges in the Middle East.

To begin with the obvious, Israel's portion of the region is minuscule by Canadian standards. The entire country can be placed within the area covered by Lake Winnipeg, Canada's fifth-largest freshwater lake, with a thousand square miles left over.

Neighbouring countries are very close by. On a clear day, you can see both the Dead Sea and Jordan from a hill in Jerusalem. A three-hour drive from Jerusalem up the Jordan Valley to the Golan Heights is instructive

because of the context it places on Israel and its neighbours. On the route, the banana plantations, the date palms and fields of ripe barley are interspersed with military listening posts and communication towers, and buried tanks left over from previous conflicts. The reason is that the trip parallels Israel's borders with Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, all of which have attacked Israel, or been the base of attacks against it, at various times over the past 60 years.

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The approach to the Lebanese border is heralded several miles out by areas of scorched fields and charred forests, courtesy of the Katyusha rockets launched against Israel by Hezbollah during last summer's war with Lebanon. It's quiet now but last July, scores of Hezbollah rockets were falling on northern Israel as far south

as Haifa, which makes an interesting point about the Israelis' ability to adjust to circumstances and get on with life. They are amazingly pragmatic and laid back about war and peace. If the rockets are flying, you lie low. When the rockets stop, normalcy returns immediately. You fix the damage and go back to work. Last summer's violence on the northern border ended just four days before it was time to harvest the grapes from the region's vineyards. The workers returned; the crop was saved.

The challenges of proximity do not end with Israel's neighbours; they are an everyday reality within the country as well.

Those Canadians who believe sections 91 and 92 of our Constitution are complex might want to contemplate the governance of the West Bank.

Captured by Israel during the 1967 Six Day War, the West Bank is considered under international law to be not part of any state and

to be "occupied by Israel." As a result of the Oslo 1 and Oslo 2 Accords, in addition to 11 "governates," the territory has been divided into three administrative categories:

- In Area A (17 percent of the territory), the Palestinian Authority has full civil control.
- In Area B (24 percent), the Palestinian Authority and Israel exercise joint administration.
- In Area C (59 percent), the Israelis exercise full control.

Ninety-eight percent of the Palestinian population lives within Areas A and B, and Israel retains overall control over Israeli settlements, airspace, transportation, security and territorial borders. There are roughly 250,000 Israeli settlers in communities scattered throughout the West Bank.

Ramallah is the headquarters of the Palestinian Authority, and it's about as far from Jerusalem as Orleans is from Parliament Hill — a



Photo: Byng Giraud

Ariel Sharon's security fence, here in northern Israel, is a source of great bitterness, but has been effective in reducing the number of suicide bombings.

15-minute drive in normal traffic. The trip is undertaken in an armoured SUV, and the soldiers at the Palestinian checkpoint look very carefully at passports and take fifteen minutes to ensure that all the "coordination" required is in order.

The Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) briefers are articulate and passionate, and they point to the recent World Bank report on the Palestinian Territories that documented their economic deterioration. They argue that the Oslo-mandated peace process has stalled and that the pace of Israeli settlement in the West Bank has not lessened. As

one of them puts it, "If the peace process doesn't kill the settlement process, then the settlement process will kill the peace process."

The PLO briefers also warn that poverty and unemployment are at a critical point in Arab West Bank communities. Young people are joining the militias because there are no jobs for them. The Palestinian Authority is too weak to provide services and maintain order, so the various factions and families are replacing its nascent government.

The PLO's strongest contempt is reserved for the security fence being built to separate the West Bank from Israel.

It's estimated that during the Second Intifada (2000-06) more than 1,000 Israelis and over 4,000 Palestinians were killed through the cycle of suicide bombings and retaliation. This led to the Israeli decision to build the security fence.

While it generally follows the Green Line, the fence diverges to take in some Israeli settlements inside the West Bank, reaching as much as 20 kilometres into the territory in some places. It separates families from relatives and farmers from olive groves; it disrupts the flow of goods and services. Access from one side to the other is only through very tight checkpoints.

This is a serious fence. In some areas, it's built of concrete, in others, barbed wire. The fence is electronically monitored by sensors and closed-circuit TV with listening posts that monitor activity at regular intervals. Beside the fence is a dirt road that is graded every few hours, and beside that is a paved road patrolled regularly by the IDF. Trackers patrol the paved road watching for footprints crossing the dirt road.

For the Palestinians, the security fence is a land grab and an escalation of the siege they feel they have lived under since 1948. It separates Palestinian from Palestinian, the West Bank from Israel and the West Bank from the Gaza Strip. It takes in aquifers in a land where water is incredibly scarce. For Israelis, on the other hand, the fence is simply a question of security and safety from terrorism. And from their point of view, the fence is a huge success. The terror attacks have virtually stopped since its construction.

While Israel's two largest traditional parties — Likud and Labour — are nominally conservative and liberal, right and left are not really the organizing features of the country's political lexicon. The challenge of surviving in a region where many of your neighbours, either across the border or across the street, are institutionally committed to ending your existence does more than focus the mind. It means you're either a hawk or a dove concerning Israel's relationship with the Palestinians and with the rest of the Arab world. It also means that every policy for dealing with national and domestic security by definition must include consideration of a war strategy.

It's important to note that Israeli attitudes toward such issues as the security fence and relations with the Palestinians are far from monolithic. Some Israelis despair that the fence disrupts the free flow of people, goods and services required for the two sides

to learn to live with each other. Many Israeli settlements deep inside the West Bank are not protected by the fence, and their residents see this as betrayal and abandonment by their own government. And it's worth recalling that in 1995, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by Yigal Amir, a right-wing Israeli radical

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at odds with Rabin's signing of the Oslo Accords.

Finding a way forward from the current situation will not be easy. Among Israeli journalists, academics and politicians, there's a pretty dispirited view of where things stand in mid-2007:

- Many Israelis feel they have run out of battle-tested leaders, the decorated heroes who in the past fought in the country's many wars and then went on to distinguished careers in politics. The former president was recently forced out of office under an embarrassing ethical cloud, and the current prime minister, Ehud Olmert, is struggling under a public approval rating of just under 3 percent. Yes, that's 3 percent!
- Even if the leadership were there, there is no social consensus among Israelis on what the next steps should be. The security fence has brought respite from the suicide bombers, but the motivations that sent them in the first place have not gone away. The removal of the Gaza settlers was supposed to help the situation, but that didn't stop Gaza from going up in flames earlier this summer. So

what should come next? As one experienced observer puts it, "We Jews have never decided what we want. You can't achieve what you can't define."

- Finally, even if Israelis had the leaders and a social consensus, exactly who would they talk with on the other side to negotiate the

next steps? At this writing, Hamas has taken Gaza, and there is now talk of the worst of all possible worlds for the Palestinians — a two-state scenario with Gaza run by Hamas and the West Bank governed by Fatah. With the Palestinian side now fighting among themselves, the chances of moving the Oslo process forward in the foreseeable future are slim to none.

Perhaps the last word should go to Aluf Benn, the experienced diplomatic editor of the newspaper *Haaretz*. "In this part of the world, it always takes a catalytic event to move the debate forward to the next stage."

For the sake of Israelis and Palestinians alike, we can only hope that that event will be less violent than similar ones in the past.

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