

GAZA, THEN WHAT? By Nir Pearlson

The naturalist John Muir wrote: "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe." During the last three weeks of war in Gaza preceding the current cease fire, the world witnessed how everything and everybody is connected. Each Israeli bomb pulverizing stone and bone on the streets of Gaza simultaneously ripped enormous gashes in the moral fabric of Israeli society. Similarly, each Hamas rocket fired deep into Israeli territory pushed the collective Palestinian dream of a normal life farther away.

The public relations war raged with the demagogues on both sides promising imminent victory. The Israelis, infuriated by the continuing attacks on their communities and exhausted from years of fear are on one side. Malnourished from weeks of biased information and anxious for their loved ones summoned to the front lines, many Israelis stood behind their leaders, who vowed to finally destroy the military capabilities of their arch-enemy Hamas. While the ground troops moved slowly to avoid booby-traps, the hasty politicians swept the entire populace deep into the deadly swamp of arrogance, callousness, and isolation.

On the other side, the oppressed Palestinian masses were bombed from all sides in their refugee ghettos. The unimaginable assaults shattered structures, decades of effort, countless innocent lives and the emotional and psychological balance of an entire generation. The Palestinian citizens reaped more poisonous fruit, trapped between decades of military occupation and their zealot leaders' agenda. The Hamas' pledge to annihilate Israel somehow justified exposing the citizens to grave danger. The militants wove their insurgence infrastructure deep into residential

neighborhoods, and the IDF flattened entire neighborhoods in its quest for gunmen. Heartless radicalism set the stage and called the shots all around.

Understandably, enraged people on both sides responded to the call to arms. And thus the deadly dance proceeded with its familiar pattern: fear numbs the mind; the deafening drumbeat of war drowns the voice of reason; we remember why we hate and forget how to love. In both camps the moral ground continues to sink; the warmongers win the PR battles; and the powerless citizens, women, and children pay the price with their lives.

As I watched the horrific images emanating from Gaza and listened to the statements of condemnation and rage, I was reminded that we are all gripped by the venomous tentacles of the same medusa. The campaigns of fundamentalism, terror, and fear on both sides of the conflict could not exist without the enemy's aggression. Incompetent maneuvering on each side consistently ushers in extremist leaderships on the other side. The attacks on Southern Israel and the devastation in Gaza will guarantee future recruitment of willing, hateful soldiers on both sides for years to come.

Look closely at the current conflict, and you will find a thousand ingredients in a boiling pot, stirred by many soiled hands: the upcoming elections in Israel; Palestinian power struggles; the U.S. elections; Inter-Arab jostling; Middle East oil; the echoes of western colonialism; the Iranian-American power struggle; an East-West cultural clash.... We pray for the cease fire in Gaza to hold. But what's next? The roots of the conflict are spread so wide and

reach so far back into history, that a permanent resolution seems impossible. It's difficult to imagine that any channels of communication between Palestinians and Israelis remain open. However, despite decades of ridicule by the mainstream media, and in the face of rising nationalism in both camps, many grass-roots peace groups have grown, linking peoples across the Israeli-Palestinian rift. Thousands of clear-headed and open-hearted individuals within dozens of organizations rise bravely above the torrent of hate propaganda, and work towards peaceful co-existence. Palestinians and Israelis work hand in hand to take on a multitude of social justice and human-rights issues including: youth educational camps; medical and welfare support centers; interfaith leadership circles; legal protection services; ex-combatants' dialogue groups; joint bereaved families support; and active resistance to fortified barriers, home demolition and the uprooting of olive groves. Anyone interested in researching or working with such groups can start with websites such as: israelpalestineforum.com; peacengo.org; jstreet.org and btvshalom.org.

A recent blog by a member of "Other Voice" - an Israeli peace group composed of residents from communities surrounding Gaza who are under constant rocket threat - is titled "Sderot War Diary" (villagesgroup.wordpress.com). The author boldly states that the war in Gaza was not fought in her name or for her safety. She fiercely challenges the generic reporter's interview question to any peace activist: "Don't you think you are being naïve?"

Growing up in Israel with a war every decade and fighting in one of them, I assure any who believe that the Middle-East conflict may only be resolved via force, that they are the simpletons. For a dose of realism, list all the violent players in the Mid-East arena, along with their coaches, trainers, proxies and sponsors around the world,

all competing to stay relevant and up-to-date. The developments in Lebanon since I served there in 1982, including the rapid rise of Hezbollah and its accelerated technological militarization serve as clues to how fast the Middle-East conflict can escalate out of control.

Understanding that the only way to resolve any conflict, including the Palestinian-Israeli one, is through peaceful diplomacy, is simple pragmatism. Israelis and Palestinians are destined to be neighbors forever, and the only way towards a common future of hope requires the establishment of two sovereign and secure states. If the Israeli and Palestinian leaders are unwilling to aggressively pursue and deliver a peaceful two-state solution, they must be replaced with brave visionary leaders who can rise up to the task.

The historic, strategic, and cultural positions of Palestine and Israel make it impossible to achieve a Mid-East solution without committed and intensive outside involvement. The new American leadership under President Obama, who exemplifies the power of hope over fear, is positioned as no prior leadership to move Israel and Palestine into negotiating and achieving peace. May Obama and his team boldly take the lead. And may daring leaders in Palestine and Israel, inspired by their visionary citizens, stand with courage and deliver their peoples to peace.

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