

Farewell, Fig Leaf

BY PAMELA OLSON

What can one conclude when a “peace process” goes on for two decades without any resolution?

Perhaps the conflict is so intractable that even people of good will cannot bridge the divides. Or maybe the conflict can be resolved, but the interlocutors aren’t good at diplomacy. (Israeli spokespeople are fond of complaining they have “no partner for peace” on the Palestinian side.)

In fact, the parameters of solving the Israeli/Palestinian conflict are fairly straightforward, based on international law, and generous to Israelis (who would receive 78% of the land under discussion). And they are agreed upon not only

by the Palestinian leadership but also by the entire Arab world, namely: Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied since 1967 and a fair, negotiated solution to the issue of Palestinian refugees driven from their homes in 1947-49.

As we’ll see, though, the “peace process” was designed from the beginning not to bring about this resolution but to prevent it. The process works to prolong a status quo that favors a more powerful over a weaker side, with an utterly biased referee posing as an “honest broker.”

What does such a process look like, how did it come about, and what can be done to change current disastrous trends?

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About This Issue

After graduating in 2002 with a degree in physics from Stanford University, Pamela Olson headed to the Middle East, eventually settling down for two years in Ramallah, where she worked for the Palestine Monitor and served as foreign press coordinator for Dr. Mustafa Barghouti's 2005 presidential campaign. (See page 13.)

She chronicled her experiences in a memoir "Fast Times in Palestine," a book Richard Falk, former U.N. Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories, called the book he has long been waiting for.

On her return to the States, Olson worked at a think tank in Washington, D.C., and it is in the light of that experience that she writes our feature article.

On page 14, we interview Helena Cobban, founder of the web site www.justworldbooks.com, as part of our series *The Link's Links*.

Our book/video selections are on page 15; they include Pamela Olson's book.

John F. Mahoney
Executive Director

Correction: On page 14 of our Sept.-Oct. 2013 issue, we misidentified the author of the book we reviewed, "The General's Son." The author is Miko Peled, not Matti Peled. We regret the error.

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The Sad Truth

According to the Likud Party platform of March 1977:

The right of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel is eternal and indisputable and is linked with the right to security and peace. Therefore, Judea and Samaria [the West Bank] will not be handed over to any foreign [i.e., Palestinian] administration. Between the sea and the Jordan River there will be only Israeli sovereignty.

Such a platform is to be expected from a right-wing Israeli party such as the Likud. Unfortunately, illegal Israeli settlements have expanded steadily in the West Bank since 1967 no matter which party has been in power in Israel. And every U.S. president since then—Democratic or Republican—has aided and abetted that expansion, both before and during the "peace process," sabotaging any hope for a two-state solution.

There was never an illusion among insiders in Israel and Washington about a balanced approach to peace in Palestine/Israel based on international law. As Columbia University professor Rashid Khalidi notes: "The words of Richard Nixon speaking of the Arabs to Henry Kissinger in 1973 could have been spoken by many of his successors, had they been as brutally frank as the thirty-seventh president of the United States: 'You've got to give [the Palestinians] hope. It's really a—frankly, let's face it: you've got to make them think that there's some motion; that something is going on; that we're

really doing our best with the Israelis.”¹

Two years later, President Ford sent a secret letter to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin stating: “Should the U.S. desire in the future to put forward proposals of its own [for Middle East peace], it will make every effort to coordinate with Israel its proposals with a view to refraining from putting forth proposals that Israel would consider unsatisfactory,” effectively giving Israel veto power over American foreign policy in the Middle East.²

President George H. W. Bush took the most confrontational stance with Israel of any other president since 1967, threatening to withdraw loan guarantees to the Israeli government at a time when a million immigrants from the former Soviet Union were being resettled in Israel. It was a bid to pressure Israel to cease settlement construction, and it forced Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir to attend the historic Madrid Peace Conference in 1991. This conference was Bush’s attempt to use the political capital gained after the First Gulf War to negotiate peace in the Middle East.

But Palestinians were not allowed to participate as a separate people or with delegates of their own choosing. They were permitted only as part of a “joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation” headed by a Jordanian. In addition, at the insistence of Shamir, any Palestinian identified with the PLO or residing in Jerusalem or the diaspora was banned from participating completely.³

The Oslo Years

The Madrid Conference became a moot point when Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization secretly negotiated a deal known as the Oslo Accords. Shortly after Clinton came into office, he had the honor of presiding over a historic handshake on the White House lawn between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat in 1993.

Unfortunately, it was all downhill from there.

The Accords were heavily biased in favor of Israel and allowed for unencumbered settlement expansion on most of the West Bank. Palestinians were told the arrangement would last for a five-year period during which final status issues would be negotiated, and the

U.S. government was called on to broker the eventual agreements.

But five years came and went, and the Palestinians received nothing except more settlements on their land. Aaron David Miller, one of the chief advisors during peace talks, later admitted, “Many American officials involved in Arab-Israeli peacemaking, myself included, have acted as Israel’s attorney, catering and coordinating with the Israelis at the expense of successful peace negotiations.”⁴

Dennis Ross, President Clinton’s Middle East envoy, was even clearer about this. He wrote in his 2004 book *The Missing Peace*: “‘Selling’ became part of our modus operandi—beginning a pattern that would characterize our approach throughout the Bush and Clinton years. We would take Israeli ideas or ideas that the Israelis could live with and work them over—trying to increase their attractiveness to the Arabs while trying to get the Arabs to scale back their expectations. Why did this pattern emerge? The realities dictated it.”⁵

The “realities” were that Palestinian human rights, political realities, and just claims under international law were largely ignored in favor of Israel’s ever-shifting “red lines.”

Not just the content but also the form of the negotiations worked in Israel’s favor. By using endless interim agreements to delay serious negotiations about core issues (such as borders, Jerusalem, and refugees), all the while allowing uninterrupted expansion of Israeli settlements and Israeli control and exploitation of Palestinian resources, it gave Israel time to entrench the occupation day to day until any acceptable resolution based on international law became a further and further dream. Tensions naturally heightened.

Clinton tried one last time to square the circle of Palestinian rights and Israeli demands during frenetic negotiations at Camp David in 1999. The Israeli negotiators refused to bend and the Palestinian delegation—who had already agreed to sign over 78% of their historic homeland to Israel—refused to surrender any further. The Palestinians were publicly blamed for the impasse, adding insult to injury.⁶

The final straw came in September 2000, when former Israeli general and alleged war criminal Ariel

Sharon, a member of the right-wing Likud party, marched on the Haram al Sharif/Temple Mount, one of the holiest sites in Islam, with scores of armed guards. The subtext of Sharon's march was clear: If he became Prime Minister, he would never allow East Jerusalem to become the capital of a Palestinian state, as international law demanded.

The response was entirely predictable. Palestinians from all walks of life engaged in massive protests. In the two weeks that followed, Israeli forces killed sixty-eight Palestinians, including fifteen children, and injured a thousand more. Twelve Palestinian-Israelis were also killed. One of them was a well-known 17-year-old peace activist named Aseel Asleh, killed by a shot to the neck at point blank range.

In those same two weeks, Palestinians killed three Israeli soldiers and two civilians.

Thus the second Intifada was born.

A few months after his stunt on the Temple Mount, amid spiraling violence, a frightened Israeli population elected Ariel Sharon Prime Minister of Israel.⁷

George W. Bush

George W. Bush entered the White House shortly after the second Intifada began, and on the following September 11, New York and Washington were attacked. Israeli Prime Minister Sharon did everything he could to conflate the terrorists of 9/11 with Palestinian resistance to occupation.

He had a great deal of help from the neoconservative movement in the U.S., which was hawkishly pro-Israel and had enormous influence over the Bush administration. Bush's base also included many moneyed and well-connected Christian Zionists who believe in a strange and relatively new Biblical interpretation called Millennial Dispensationalism, which among other things aims to hasten the ingathering of Jews to Israel so the Christian Messiah will return and usher in the end times and Armageddon. It is an essentially anti-Semitic philosophy, but it provides useful political support for some of Israel's most dangerous policies.⁸

The trifecta of post-9/11 Islamophobia, neocon

advisors, and Christian Zionist supporters made the George W. Bush administration the most friendly toward Israel in U.S. history.

This "extra special" relationship was on display in April 2004, when Bush sent a letter to Israeli Prime Minister Sharon stating that "existing major Israeli population centers" (that is, massive illegal settlements and the Palestinian lands around them) were "realities" that would have to be taken into account in a final settlement. It was the first official U.S. statement legitimizing these illegal colonies. It stripped the Palestinians not only of land that belonged to them, but also of one of their last remaining bargaining chips.

The Bush administration also voted yearly in the U.N. against the Palestinian right of return (a position the U.S. government first took in 1998) and continued the trend of vetoing any resolution at the United Nations of which Israel did not approve. The American judge was the sole dissenting opinion in June 2004 when the International Court of Justice found the route of Israel's Wall in the West Bank to be illegal under international law.

Another "peace process" sprang up that Bush dubbed the "Road Map for Peace." But according to one Palestinian expert involved in the process, it took on a familiar refrain:

The "peace negotiations" were a deceptive farce, whereby biased terms were unilaterally imposed by Israel and systematically endorsed by the U.S. and EU capitals. Far from enabling a negotiated fair end of the conflict, the pursuit of the Oslo process has deepened Israeli segregationist policies and justified the tightening of the security control imposed on the Palestinian population as well as its geographical fragmentation. Far from preserving the land on which to build a State, it has tolerated the intensification of the colonization of the Palestinian territory. Far from maintaining a national cohesion, the process I participated in, albeit briefly, proved to be instrumental in creating and aggravating divisions amongst Palestinians.⁹

Barack Obama

When Barack Obama was voted into office—a

dynamic speaker with a worldly and eclectic past, a Muslim father, and an educated and seemingly liberal outlook—the world breathed a collective sigh of relief.

The Arab world especially welcomed a president of color who had lived in the Muslim world and talked of transformative change based on hope and good will. They were desperate for a change, a sweeping away of the bizarre and brutal paternalism of George W. Bush. The worldwide celebrations in November 2008 lasted well into the night. In the Gaza Strip, a mug was designed to commemorate the event.

Right-wing supporters of Israel were wary, though, worried that this young upstart from Chicago might upset their apple cart. His visit to Cairo and speeches mentioning both Palestinian and Israeli suffering made Israel supporters bristle. It got worse when Obama appointed George Mitchell as his Middle East envoy, an American of Lebanese descent who helped broker peace in Northern Ireland and who understood very well the realities of the region—as opposed to Israel’s talking points about them.

When Obama called on Israel to freeze settlement construction in preparation for peace talks,¹⁰ it was a bridge too far. The Israel lobby, led by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), mobilized pressure through the Senate, three-quarters of whom sent Obama a bi-partisan cease and desist letter implicitly chastising him for his confrontational stance toward Israel.¹¹

It didn’t help that Obama came into office just as Netanyahu and his pro-settler coalition came to power in Israel. The 2010 Republican midterm victory strengthened Netanyahu, as the neocons and Tea Party were ideologically aligned with him.

He also came into office already in debt to Dennis Ross, one of the most nakedly pro-Israel participants in the Oslo process, blamed by his colleagues for some of its worst failures. This bias eminently qualified Ross to vouch for Obama’s “Israel bona fides” in crucial states with pivotal Jewish communities when he ran for president in 2008, especially in Pennsylvania and Florida.¹² In exchange for this service, Ross was given the Iran portfolio at the State Department. He had no official position vis-à-vis Pal-

estine/Israel affairs, but that didn’t stop him from insinuating himself in them, all the while remaining in direct contact with his friends in the Israeli government.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and George Mitchell became frustrated with Ross’s meddling. He soon left the State Department only to end up on the National Security Council as a special assistant to the president and senior director for the Central Region (which includes the Middle East). In the summer of 2009, he was called on to “quarterback” all Middle East issues.

Ross worked consistently to undermine George Mitchell and publicly opposed Obama’s request for Israel to cease expanding settlements. His objective was to get things back to the same old script, capitulating to Israeli “red lines” while ignoring Palestinian rights. And he succeeded.

Mitchell resigned in May 2011, barely two years after being appointed.

Obama got the message of how politically costly it would be to use America’s vast leverage to pressure Israel to change policies that violate international and even American law.¹³ He quickly caved on the settlement freeze and has since allowed Israel to do virtually whatever it has pleased. He has chosen to spend his limited political capital on domestic issues, such as passing health care reform, rather than defying Israel on behalf of stateless and persecuted Palestinians.

Soon Obama’s rhetoric was among the most inflated, obsequious, and counterfactual “pro-Israel” oratory in U.S. history. In a speech before the U.N. General Assembly in September 2011, he stated:

America’s commitment to Israel’s security is unshakable. Our friendship with Israel is deep and enduring. And so we believe that any lasting peace must acknowledge the very real security concerns that Israel faces every single day.

Let us be honest with ourselves: Israel is surrounded by neighbors that have waged repeated wars against it. Israel’s citizens have been killed by rockets fired at their houses and

suicide bombs on their buses. Israel's children come of age knowing that throughout the region, other children are taught to hate them. Israel, a small country of less than eight million people, looks out at a world where leaders of much larger nations threaten to wipe it off the map. The Jewish people carry the burden of centuries of exile and persecution, and fresh memories of knowing that six million people were killed simply because of who they are. Those are the facts. They cannot be denied.

This image of a frightened, vulnerable Israel bears little relation to reality. Most of its conflicts have been wars of aggression and opportunity. Suicide bombings stopped long before this speech was made. Gaza's rockets kill in the single digits per year while Israeli violence has killed many hundreds of Palestinians since the second Intifada ended. And no nation has ever threatened to wipe Israel off the map. (The last claim is based on a deliberate mistranslation of a speech by former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.) The Israeli security establishment knows it has no serious military rivals.

But this type of speech serves a specific purpose: "If a country is considered to be so vulnerable as to be confronting perpetual existential danger, and as having teetered on the brink of imminent destruction since the moment of its creation, almost anything is permitted to it, and much can be forgiven it."¹⁴ Israel's systematic violations of Palestinian human rights and international law can thus be explained away as desperate acts of self-defense.

And Obama's support for Israel goes far beyond rhetoric. Military aid has gone from \$2.55 billion in 2009 to over \$3.1 billion in 2013, plus \$100 million in the American defense budget for development of an Israeli missile shield. According to Obama:

I think the prime minister—and certainly the defense minister—would acknowledge that we've never had closer military and intelligence cooperation. When you look at what I've done with respect to security for Israel, from joint training and joint exercises that outstrip anything that's been done in the past, to helping finance and construct the Iron Dome program to make sure that Israeli families are less

vulnerable to missile strikes, to ensuring that Israel maintains its qualitative military edge, to fighting back against delegitimization of Israel, whether at the [U.N.] Human Rights Council, or in front of the U.N. General Assembly, or during the Goldstone Report, or after the flare-up involving the flotilla—the truth of the matter is that the relationship has functioned very well.¹⁵

The "delegitimization" that Obama is referring to includes a report by credible experts about gross Israeli violations of the laws of war (the Goldstone Report) during Operation Cast Lead in 2008-2009 (in which around 1,400 Palestinians were killed, mostly civilians, including hundreds of children, while 13 Israelis were killed, four of them by friendly fire). The Obama administration rejected the report's findings without any serious research or fact-finding of its own.

The Obama administration also withdrew support for UNESCO to punish it for accepting Palestine as a member, vetoed a Palestinian statehood bid in the U.N. Security Council, and supported Israel when it withheld tax revenues from the Palestinian Authority to punish them for applying for 'non-member observer state' status at the U.N. General Assembly.

Obama's Peace Talks

Given all this, it's not surprising that most knowledgeable observers responded with little more than a tired shrug when Obama, at the start of his second term, appointed John Kerry Middle East Envoy and announced renewed peace talks.

The Palestinian leadership insisted they would not engage in talks while settlement expansion was ongoing—they didn't want to fall for that same old trick again. But as usual, their objections were ignored, and talks went ahead with no preconditions for Israelis.

Preconditions were imposed on the Palestinians, however. From his position of powerlessness, Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas made a humiliating promise not to lodge any complaints against Israel with international legal bodies, such as the Inter-

national Criminal Court or the International Court of Justice, for the duration of the negotiations. This option was virtually the only tangible benefit of applying for 'non-member observer' status at the U.N., and Abbas was forced to give it up before negotiations even began.

"This is more than a mistake, it's a catastrophe," said Shawan Jabarain, head of the Ramallah-based human rights group Al Haq. "It's like when one is being beaten and you take away from him the ability to go to court and the police."¹⁶

If one is inclined to search for a silver lining, the good news is that at least the hypocrisy is becoming more clear, open, and exposed. During a recent press conference with State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki, for example, several journalists cornered her into admitting that there would be severe consequences for Palestinians when they did something deemed "unhelpful" to the peace process, yet no consequences whatsoever when Israel did things that were far more harmful, such as expanding settlements.¹⁷ The bias could not have been clearer.

When this last-ditch effort fails, perhaps finally the blame will fall where it belongs, the fig leaf will disintegrate for good, this rigged framework will be abandoned, and the stage will be set for more fruitful strategies to end the occupation.

Reasons for the Bias

Why does the U.S. government have such a passionate attachment to the dictates of successive Israeli governments?

It started with President Harry Truman, who spoke of powerful, organized domestic political forces that were "anxious for the success of Zionism."¹⁸ There was no similarly powerful or organized force arguing against it. It was politically safer to recognize the new Israeli state, and he did so despite warnings from his advisors that it would result in decades of violence and instability in the region. Their warnings, of course, were all too prophetic.

Israel has also been caught stealing U.S. technology and selling it to rivals, and AIPAC agents have been found spying on the U.S. government. Israel's violations of international law using U.S. weapons and support harm America's image in the world as

well as its security. According to the *9/11 Commission Report*, Israeli oppression of Palestinians was one of the chief grievances of the 9/11 attackers, and the conflict serves as a radicalizing element and recruitment tool for groups that target the U.S. and its allies.

Other than George W. Bush, every U.S. president since Carter has come into office attempting to breathe at least some degree of fresh air into the moribund and deteriorating Israeli-Palestinian reality. But virtually every effort to go against the wishes of Israeli governments has been frustrated. Why?

The Lobby

The Israel lobby, dominated by AIPAC, is consistently ranked as one of the most powerful and effective lobbies in Washington. How powerful?

AIPAC's former second-in-command, Steve Rosen (later indicted under the Espionage Act), was asked this question by Jeffrey Goldberg, a journalist known for his sympathy toward Israel. He described Rosen's response:

A half smile appeared on his face, and he pushed a napkin across the table. "You see this napkin?" he said. "In twenty-four hours, we could have the signatures of seventy senators on this napkin."¹⁹

It's not much of an exaggeration. Recall the 76 Senators who signed AIPAC's "cease and desist" letter in 2010.²⁰ When Netanyahu spoke before a joint session of Congress in May 2011, he received 29 bipartisan standing ovations at a time when his relations with Obama were tense.

Chuck Hagel, when he was nominated to be Secretary of Defense, was grilled relentlessly by Congress mostly about whether and to what extent he would pay obeisance to Israel. The spectacle prompted the writers of Saturday Night Live to create a sketch in which John McCain interrogated Hagel about whether or not he would fellate a donkey if Israel required it.

Newt Gingrich, a Republican candidate for president in 2012, was literally bought and paid for to the tune of over \$10 million by Sheldon Adelson, a

wealthy casino mogul whose main political concern is blocking any possibility of a Palestinian state, which he sees as “a steppingstone for the destruction of Israel and the Jewish people.”²¹

The nation watched in bemusement as Gingrich began parroting Adelson’s talking points, including that there is no such thing as a Palestinian people. After Gingrich flamed out, Adelson was the largest single funder of the eventual Republican nominee, Mitt Romney—who also trashed the idea of a two-state solution.

Another source of lobby power comes from various think tanks, such as the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the venerable Brookings Institution, funded by Israeli-American billionaire entertainment mogul Haim Saban. Saban operates within the Democratic Party as an advocate for Israel, and he even tried to buy the *LA Times* in order to influence its Israel coverage.²² The Washington Institute for Near East Policy was established by AIPAC leaders to give academic credit to their lobbying efforts.

Despite the fact that these are partisan organizations that frequently turn out reports and policy recommendation that either ignore or downplay Israeli intransigence and Palestinian just rights and claims, they are treated in Washington as if they are disinterested research institutes. It lends a vital air of legitimacy to clearly biased policies.

No Push-back

As influential as the lobby is, its greatest power comes from the fact that it operates virtually unopposed. The odds are stacked against Palestinians: They have no military, no nuclear weapons, little wealth, few resources, and precious few bargaining chips. In the face of the Israel lobby, they possess no comparable organization or group of organizations with such single-minded focus, vast reserves of wealth, or connection within American culture or the halls of power.

When a letter is placed in front of a Congressman, and he knows he may pay a political price for not signing, while signing will cost him only the five seconds it will take to scribble his or her signature—in Washington, that kind of decision is sadly easy.

The Arab world, which does possess vast wealth, has been of little help. The Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 was never backed by any serious pressure on Israel to come to the table. Saudi Arabia has been an important strategic partner of the U.S. since at least 1945 (with the 1973 oil embargo being the sole exception). So have the various other Gulf states, the monarchies in Morocco and Jordan, and the military rulers of Egypt. Countries that have defied the U.S., such as Iraq and Iran, have faced dire consequences. The undemocratic rulers in the region fear the economic and military might of the U.S. more than they fear the wrath of their own populations (the vast majority of whom support Palestinian rights).

Turkey, a democratic state, has made symbolic gestures and statements supporting Palestinian rights, but their close military and political collaboration with Israel has never been in serious jeopardy.

The European Union is well aware of the situation, but due to understandable guilt over the Holocaust, business and military ties, and domestic lobby pressures, they have been rather lukewarm in their actions against Israeli occupation, aside from sending funding to the U.N. and various NGOs that make the occupation slightly less miserable for Palestinians (and easier for the Israeli government). Recently that has begun to change slightly, and I hope the trend will continue.

The Narrative

The lobby also operates with an American public almost completely in the dark about the realities of the region. Israeli talking points are easily able to fill the vacuum.

This is in part because of the simple fact that virtually all Americans have read the Old Testament or at least watched *The Ten Commandments* starring Charlton Heston. Our movies, art, and literature are steeped in Biblical allusions. We grow up with a compelling and romantic narrative of Jewish people “returning” to the Holy Land, and their heroic deeds, foibles, and dreams beautifully humanized by literature and poetry. Nearly every American school child also learns about the Holocaust and reads *The Diary of Anne Frank*, giving us a deeply personal and sobering look at the unthinkable modern tragedy of

the Jewish people.

By contrast, most Americans know virtually nothing about the Arab or Muslim worlds, much less the heroic, tragic, and beautiful stories of the Palestinian experience. By the time I finished university, the only images in my mind of Palestinians were of fanatical terrorists and pathetic victims. They're virtually never presented in our culture or media as simply human beings, and their popular image tends to be intimidating, sinister, and unrelatable. When Palestinians try to tell their own story, most Americans don't know where to begin to grasp what they are talking about.

American news organizations contribute to this bias. Some, like Fox News, the *New York Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, owned by hawkish Israel supporter Rupert Murdoch, make little pretense of balance.

Others, like the *New York Times* and CNN, seem more nuanced, but if you look closer, you see the patterns. Jerusalem bureau chiefs are almost always Jewish with some knowledge of Hebrew, and virtually never Palestinian or with any knowledge of Arabic. Their narratives tend to treat Palestinian statements as "claims" and Israeli statements as facts. Israeli deaths are treated as major news stories whereas Palestinian deaths (not to mention oppression, ethnic cleansing, home demolitions, non-violent resistance, and so on) are largely ignored.

When Palestinian narratives do manage to get too close to the mainstream, there is a price to pay. Last year, Bob Simon of CBS' flagship news program *60 Minutes* had the audacity to travel to Bethlehem and interview Palestinian Christians about their lives under occupation.

The official Israeli narrative of Palestinian Christians is that, yes, life is difficult for them, but it's because of Islamic extremists, not the Israeli occupation. This is pure nonsense, as anyone knows who actually bothers to ask Palestinian Christians about their own situation. And that is precisely what Bob Simon did.

There it was on primetime American TV: Christians in Jesus' birthplace complaining about Israeli occupation, talking about the West Bank being turned into Swiss cheese by settlements and the

Wall, and Bethlehem being turned into an open air prison by Israel's policies. The segment also publicized the Kairos Document, a Palestinian Christian appeal to the world's conscience to help end Israeli oppression.

Israel's talking points were, for once, utterly demolished. It's safe to say the Israel lobby had a con-ription fit.

Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren phoned Jeff Fager, the head of CBS News and executive producer of *60 Minutes*, and tried to have the segment axed before it was even aired. When Fager stood by the piece, Oren demanded air time for a rebuttal. He got it, but he made a complete fool of himself, so it was a rather Pyrrhic victory.²³

After the program aired, Bob Simon was excoriated in a full-page advertisement in the *Wall Street Journal* that showed his photograph along with accusations that he had deliberately defamed Israel—which could have been interpreted as a threat to his safety. CBS received 32,000 angry emails, and the station was hounded for over a year by the Orwellianly-named "Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America" (CAMERA), which demanded multiple retractions. The following year's corporate shareholder meeting's Q&A was dominated by CAMERA activists demanding satisfaction.

They haven't gotten it yet. But it goes to show the level of organized and relentless pressure a news organization can expect if it goes too far outside the lines of discourse acceptable to Israel. And most busy editors and executives don't want to deal with this kind of hassle.

During the Civil Rights era, southern Senators and skittish advertisers similarly tried to quash coverage of sit-ins, freedom rides, and horrible repression of non-violent demonstrations.

Imagine how the world might be different if they had succeeded.

Reasons for Hope

But there is a great deal of hope in several recent trends.

Some Israelis and Israel supporters are beginning

to realize that the status quo—and where it is leading, i.e., toward further entrenched apartheid and possible bloody conflict—is not in the real interest of Israelis. Two former Israeli prime ministers, Ehud Barak and Ehud Olmert—once they were safely out of office—warned of an anti-apartheid struggle and eventual one-state solution if major changes aren't made.

So far this has fallen on mostly deaf ears within both Israel and the American Jewish establishment, both of which have taken alarmingly rightward tacks in recent years.

But two pillars of the occupation are vulnerable. The first is the fact that Israel pays virtually no price for exploiting Palestinian labor and resources while reaping many economic benefits. The second is U.S. public opinion about the legitimacy of Israel's policies. And they go hand in hand.

BDS

The movement to Boycott, Divest from, and Sanction Israel (BDS) until it ends the occupation and complies with international law got its start in 2005. Palestinian civil society, represented by more than 170 political parties, NGOs, civil rights groups, and unions of Palestinian women, farmers, teachers, lawyers, doctors, dentists, and professors, made a historic call:

In light of Israel's persistent violations of international law, and... given that all forms of international intervention and peace-making have until now failed to convince or force Israel to comply with humanitarian law, to respect fundamental human rights and to end its occupation and oppression of the people of Palestine, and in view of the fact that people of conscience in the international community have historically shouldered the moral responsibility to fight injustice, as exemplified in the struggle to abolish apartheid in South Africa through diverse forms of boycott, divestment and sanctions...

We, representatives of Palestinian civil society, call upon international civil society organizations and people of conscience all over the

world to impose broad boycotts and implement divestment initiatives against Israel similar to those applied to South Africa in the apartheid era. We appeal to you to pressure your respective states to impose embargoes and sanctions against Israel. We also invite conscientious Israelis to support this Call, for the sake of justice and genuine peace.

The movement is growing quickly all around the world, with new victories reported weekly. Artists, scientists, and authors have refused to appear in Israel or canceled scheduled appearances following appeals from BDS activists. The Norwegian government has divested from companies that profit from the occupation, and a massive corporation called Veolia, which until recently operated bus lines for settlers on segregated roads, recently sold off all its bus lines in Palestine/Israel after a massive worldwide campaign.

In one of the biggest victories to date, the European Union published new guidelines that effectively sanction any Israeli entity with ties to illegal settlements. And virtually all of Israel is tied to the settlements one way or another. Europeans are huge trading, travel, sporting, and cultural partners with Israel, and their "charitable" funding underwrites the occupation and makes it cheaper and easier for Israel. If these guidelines are maintained and expanded, it could have a devastating impact.

Public Opinion

The Israeli government's justifications for their actions have always been on the thin side, dependent on propaganda with little basis in reality, and Islamophobic trends in the West have played into their hands. But it's difficult to blame illegal Israeli settlement expansion on Islamic radicals, and Israeli extremism—from settler "price tag" attacks to a rabbi funded by the Israeli government (Yitzhak Shapiro) who authorizes the killing of non-Jewish children under very dubious circumstances—is becoming more pronounced and visible by the day.

Most people are fundamentally fair and decent, and what's being done to the Palestinians is fundamentally unfair and indecent. The more people know about it, the more likely they are to become

active in principled, non-violent corrective strategies like BDS. BDS campaigns, in turn, foster public debate and education in every community where they take place, leading to a virtuous cycle of awareness and activism.

Shifting public opinion can also have a real political impact. Congress has so far been unwilling to authorize a strike on Syria despite the Israel lobby's support for such a strike. The lobby's efforts to foment a war with Iran have also largely fallen on deaf ears. When American public opinion becomes as hostile to unconditional support for Israel as it is to strikes on Syria and war with Iran, the lobby will lose a great deal of its power.

The strategic liability of our support for Israel is also becoming clearer. Many in the State and Defense Departments understand this very well but rarely say so until they are retired or out of office. Retired U.S. general James Mattis recently admitted at the Aspen Institute Security Forum:

I paid a military security price every day as a commander of CENTCOM because the Americans were seen as biased in support of Israel and that [discouraged] all the moderate Arabs who want to be [allied] with us because they can't come out publicly in support of people who don't want to show respect for the Arab Palestinians.

He warned that if the peace process failed, a kind of apartheid was around the corner, and "That didn't work too well the last time I saw that practiced in a country."²⁴

Peter Beinart argues in his book *The Crisis of Zionism* that there has been a rightward shift in the aging leadership of the institutions of the American Jewish community that are most supportive of a hard line on Israel, such as the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, AIPAC, the American Jewish Congress, the Anti-Defamation League, and so on.

At the same time, younger Jews are becoming estranged from Israel because they are aware of their privilege, more distanced from the Holocaust, and

less able to be manipulated by fear. And their generally liberal values are coming into conflict with the essentially tribalist values of the American and Israeli Jewish right-wing.

A turning point in larger U.S. public opinion came in 2006 with the publication of Jimmy Carter's book *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* and in 2007 with Walt and Mearsheimer's *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy*. Activists and academics had been making similar points for decades, but it was received differently coming from a respected former president and two eminent Ivy League professors. The usual smear tactics were used against them, including accusing them of anti-Semitism. But they were willing and able to withstand the attacks and stand by their theses. Precious space was opened up in which it became politically and socially safer to make similar arguments. The Israel lobby and the word "Apartheid" relating to Israel, previously unmentionable in polite society, became legitimate topics of mainstream discourse.

Thomas Friedman, a long-time friend of Israel, made a bold statement after Netanyahu's famous 29 standing ovations: "I sure hope that Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, understands that the standing ovation he got in Congress this year was not for his politics. That ovation was bought and paid for by the Israel lobby."²⁵ Such a declaration in the pages of the *New York Times* would have been unthinkable even a few years earlier.

And nowadays, when one reads articles such as this one by Friedman, the top ten or so reader-recommended comments tend to display a knowledge of the region more sophisticated than that of the pundits and journalists themselves. In other words, when it comes to this topic, *New York Times* readers are out in front of the writers.

The most astonishing story to come out of *The New York Times* in recent years was a piece by Ben Ehrenreich about non-violent Palestinian resistance in Nabi Saleh.²⁶ While most articles about Palestine/Israel equivocate and pull punches to soften the full force of reality, this article offered an unfiltered, honest, and terrifying glimpse of life under occupation.

The phenomenal film *Five Broken Cameras* pro-

vides another heart-wrenchingly honest portrayal, and it was deservedly nominated for an Oscar—perhaps the most mainstream accolade any Palestinian narrative has ever received.

Anthony Bourdain, famous food and travel TV personality, recently ventured into the West Bank and Gaza—something virtually unprecedented on popular American TV—and found delicious food, warm hospitality, and adorable children—in short, human beings. It was unbelievably refreshing to see Palestinians portrayed as such.

As for Bob Simon and his ground-breaking report on Palestinian Christians, it's true that CBS received 32,000 angry emails. But it also received 35,000 supportive emails. And as American Christians learn more about the reality in the Holy Land, mainline churches have begun to discuss, endorse, and participate in the BDS movement to varying degrees, and the trend is growing.

Books, films, and plays are also being written to popularize the Palestinian narrative and expose Israel's actions, such as *Mornings in Jenin* by Susan Abulhawa, *Goliath: Life and Loathing in Greater Israel* by Max Blumenthal, and my own contribution, *Fast Times in Palestine*, a personal account of living under Israeli occupation for two years during and after the second Intifada.

Such chronicles are crucial, because human minds are wired to respond more strongly to narratives than to facts. We shouldn't exploit this, but we should use narrative effectively as a vital supplement to the facts.

As more people become educated, more space opens up to speak publicly about these issues, and so on, in a virtuous spiral that moves inexorably toward the truth.

In Conclusion

The lobby is still very powerful, but it is weakening. Truth is a one-way valve; thousands of people at any given moment are learning about Palestine while very few are un-learning. Activists who campaigned for decades against Apartheid in South Africa are astonished at how quickly the BDS movement is growing. U.S. public opinion still favors Israel, but

most of that support is weak and can be swayed if people are given the right information in a format they can understand and assimilate into their view of the world.

It feels sometimes like the occupation will never end, like the American public will never wake up, like the Israeli government, army, and lobby are all-powerful. This feeling is especially oppressive in the West Bank and Gaza, in the shadows of massive walls, mammoth settlements, and all-seeing drones and sniper towers. And in Washington, where defying the Israel lobby can still cost you a promotion or even your job.

But five years before Apartheid fell, if someone had suggested the regime would be gone in five years, he or she would have been advised to sober up. Two years before the Berlin Wall came down, it felt like a permanent fact of life. A year before the Soviet Union dissolved, it was a global superpower.

Situations that are fundamentally unjust and unsustainable have a way of collapsing unexpectedly. In the meantime, we have work to do. ■



Pamela Olson, author of *Fast Times in Palestine*, is currently working on a second book, *Palestine, DC*.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Rashid Khalidi, *Brokers of Deceit*, Beacon Press (2013), p. 65
- ² Khalidi, *Brokers*, p 8.
- ³ Khalidi, *Brokers*, p. 33.
- ⁴ Aaron David Miller, "Israel's Lawyer," *Washington Post*, May 23, 2005.

⁵ Josh Ruebner, “Good riddance, ‘peace process,’” *LA Times*, January 28, 2011.

⁶ Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, “Camp David: The Tragedy of Errors,” *New York Review of Books*, August 9, 2001.

⁷ The first suicide bombing of the second Intifada took place on March 4, 2001. By that time more than 300 Palestinians had been killed, including 91 children (half of whom were killed by gunfire to the head). In the same period, 14 Israelis were killed in Israel and 49 were killed in the West Bank and Gaza, one a child. See <http://www.btselem.org/statistics>; cited in Pamela Olson, *Fast Times in Palestine*, Seal Press (2013), p. 178.

⁸ Jane Lampman, “Mixing Prophecy and Politics,” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 7, 2004.

⁹ Ali Abunimah, “Palestine Papers whistleblower revealed and Saeb Erekat responds,” *Electronic Intifada*, May 14, 2011.

¹⁰ Chris McGreal, “Obama administration officials in Israel to demand end to settlement building,” *The Guardian*, July 27, 2009.

¹¹ “76 Senators sign on to Israel letter,” *Politico*, April 13, 2010.

¹² Khalidi, *Brokers*, p. 100.

¹³ The Arms Export Control Act stipulates that weapons received from the U.S. by foreign countries should be used only for legitimate self-defense. When the President is aware of the possibility of violations of the AECA, the law requires a report to Congress on the potential violations. The Israeli government is in violation of this law in many cases where it uses American weapons, yet no reports or complaints have been filed, and the shipments continue, in violation of U.S. law.

¹⁴ Khalidi, *Brokers*, p. 78.

¹⁵ Jeffrey Goldberg, “Obama to Iran and Israel: ‘As President of

the United States, I don’t bluff,’” *Atlantic*, March 2, 2012.

¹⁶ Ben Lynfield, “Israel increases rate of home demolitions as peace talks chug along,” *Christian Science Monitor*, September 29, 2013.

¹⁷ Philip Weiss, “No consequences... ad finitum’—Reporters reject State Dept. explanation of U.S. policy on settlements,” *Mondoweiss*, December 8, 2011.

¹⁸ Khalidi, *Brokers*, p. 103.

¹⁹ Jeffrey Goldberg, “Real Insiders,” *The New Yorker*, July 4, 2005.

²⁰ In fact, when I was researching this article I had to sift through several AIPAC-sponsored initiatives with 70+ Senatorial signatures to find the one I wanted. I even found an AIPAC-sponsored bill that every single Senator voted for despite Obama’s objections. See: Philip Weiss, “AIPAC posterizes Obama in Senate, 100-0,” *Mondoweiss*, December 8, 2011.

²¹ “What Sheldon Adelson Wants,” *New York Times*, June 23, 2012.

²² Connie Bruck, “The Influencer,” *New Yorker*, May 10, 2010.

²³ This relatively short CBS segment entitled “Christians in the Holy Land”—and Michael Oren’s priceless rebuttal—is well worth watching.

²⁴ Max Blumenthal, “If Kerry fails, Israel will be an apartheid state ‘and that didn’t work too well last time,’ CENTCOM general warns,” *Mondoweiss*, July 21, 2013.

²⁵ Thomas Friedman, “Newt, Mitt, Bibi and Vladimir,” *New York Times*, December 13, 2011.

²⁶ Ben Ehrenreich, “Is This Where the Third Intifada Will Start?” *New York Times*, March 15, 2013.



Dr. Mustafa Barghouti was among the candidates who campaigned to succeed the recently deceased Yasser Arafat as President of the Palestinian Authority in 2005, an election subsequently won by Mahmoud Abbas. Pamela Olson, who served as Dr. Barghouti’s foreign press coordinator, took this photograph as Israeli soldiers denied his attempt to carry the campaign into Hebron.

From *The Link's* Links

www.justworldbooks.com



Helena Cobban is the founder of Just World Books. This interview was conducted by AMEU's Executive Director John Mahoney.

You first appeared in the pages of *The Link* in 1985 when we carried your book on the Palestine Liberation Organization. In 2010 you founded Just World Books, a publishing firm with a strong focus on the Palestinians. What has sustained your interest over the years in that part of the world? I've been involved with the Palestine Question since 1970, the year I first traveled to Lebanon and saw some of the conditions of Palestinian refugees there firsthand. My book on the P.L.O., which was published in 1984, drew together materials I had amassed during my seven years of work in Beirut, 1974-81, as a foreign correspondent for the London Sunday Times, the Christian Science Monitor, etc. Over the following years I authored three more books on the Middle East. I had grown up in England, and after I left Lebanon I came to the United States. I was severely taken aback to discover the degree to which unthinking support for Israel permeated all aspects of the popular culture here. In 1982, when the I.D.F. was besieging West Beirut, no less a figure than the anti-war icon (in the U.S. context) Jane Fonda was proud to be photographed disporting herself on an Israeli tank as it shelled West Beirut. I am happy that attitudes have been changing rapidly in the U.S. in recent years, especially among the young people.

You've said that your experience as a journalist has given you a newshound's addiction to a speedy turnaround. How have you applied that addiction to book publishing? My previous experience as an author had shown me how frustrating it can be to deal with the very long turnaround times imposed

on manuscripts in the traditional book-publishing model—usually considerably more than a year. And when you're writing about rapidly evolving current events, that can be very hard. So when I founded Just World Books I gave the company the tagline "Timely Books for Changing Times," and promised authors a much speedier turnaround time. Right now (mid-October) we're working with Gareth Porter on his important book "Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare." We need to get this book out fast because it pulls together for the first time the story of how U.S. and Israeli officials, working together over the course of some decades, essentially fabricated and then broadly publicized this whole story about Iran having a covertly military nuclear program. We're planning to have early PDFs of the book available well before Christmas and review-only print copies available shortly thereafter. That way, the book can help to inform publics worldwide (but especially here in the U.S.) about the background to what's happening in the talks in Geneva.

Laila El-Haddad, the author of two of your books, "Gaza Mom" and "The Gaza Kitchen", was recently featured on the season's premier of CNN's "Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown." That had to make you feel good. It was exciting for all of us (and for Palestine's friends everywhere) that Laila was able to do that with Bourdain. He was courageous to devote so much of that show to his visit with Laila to various places inside Gaza. It was also a testament to Laila's amazing communication skills and her passion for describing the situation of Gaza's 1.6 million people to people in the west who may not want to hear what she has to say. I am proud to be her publisher.

As you noted, we're in mid-October, at the start of the gift-giving season. Could you list other books on your web site that we haven't mentioned that would make good gifts? Three recommendations: Miko Peled's "The General's Son," Rabbi Brant Rosen's "Wrestling in the Daylight," and Amb. Chas Freeman's "America's Misadventures in the Middle East." Three terrific books by three terrific authors!

Have a joyous Christmas—and a busy New Year. Thanks.

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- Olson, P. **Fast Times in Palestine**, paper, 2013, 320 pp., AMEU: \$15.00
- 5 Broken Cameras**. Oscar-nominated documentary, 2008, 90-minute DVD, AMEU: \$25.00.
- Occupation 101**. History of the colonization of Palestine, 90-minute DVD, AMEU: \$15.00.
- Baltzer, A., **Life in Occupied Palestine**, 2006, DVD, 61 minutes, AMEU: \$20.00.
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- Wagner, D., **Dying in the Land of Promise**, paper, 2001, 300 pp., AMEU: \$17.95.
- Fischbach, M., **Records of Dispossession**, cloth, 332 pp., 2003, the "land swap" of 1947-48, AMEU: \$28.50.

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