

No Middle East peace without tough love

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We now have word that the Quartet's envoy Tony Blair and Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel intend to organise yet another peace conference, this time in Berlin in June.

It is hard to believe that after the long string of failed peace initiatives, stretching back at least to the Madrid conference of 1991, statesmen and stateswomen are recycling these failures without seemingly having a clue as to why the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is even more hopeless today than before these many peace exercises first got underway.

The scandal of the international community's impotence in resolving one of history's longest bloodlettings is that it *does* know what the problem is, but does not have the courage to speak the truth, much less to deal with it. The next peace conference in Germany - or in Moscow, where the Russians want to hold it - will suffer from the same gutlessness that has marked all previous efforts. It will deal with everything except the problem primarily responsible for this conflict's multi-generational impasse.

That problem is that for all of the sins attributable to the Palestinians - including disastrous leadership, failed institution-building, and the murderous violence of the rejectionist groups - there is no prospect for a viable, sovereign Palestinian state primarily because Israel's various governments, from 1967 until today, have never had the intention of allowing such a state to come into being.

It is one thing if Israeli governments had insisted on delaying a Palestinian state until certain Israeli security concerns were dealt with. But no government that is serious about a two-state solution to the conflict would have pursued without let-up the theft and fragmentation of Palestinian lands that even a child understands makes Palestinian statehood impossible.

Given the overwhelming disproportion of power between the occupiers and the occupied, it is hardly surprising that Israeli governments and their military and security establishments developed a ravenous appetite for Palestinian land. What is astounding is that the international community, pretending to believe Israel's claim that it is the victim and their occupied subjects are the aggressors, has allowed this devastating dispossession of the Palestinians to go on and the law of the jungle to prevail.

As long as Israel believes that delaying the peace process buys it time to create facts on the ground that will prove irreversible, no peace process can succeed. And, if the international

community continues to indulge Israel's pretense that its desire for a two-state solution is being frustrated by the Palestinians, the dispossession of the Palestinian people will indeed become irreversible.

There can be no greater delusion on the part of Western countries weighed down by guilt for the Holocaust than the belief that accommodating such an outcome would be an act of friendship to the Jewish people. The abandonment of the Palestinians is surely not an atonement for the abandonment of European Jewry, nor will it serve the security of the state of Israel and its people.

In his column "Politicus" of March 25, John Vinocur of *The New York Times* suggests that the virtually unqualified declarations of support for Israel by Merkel and France's Nicolas Sarkozy are "at a minimum... an attempt to seek Israeli moderation by means of public assurances with this tacit subtext: these days, the European Union is not, or is no longer, its reflexive antagonist."

The expectation that uncritical Western support of Israel would lead to greater Israeli moderation and greater willingness to take risks for peace is blatantly contradicted by the conflict's own history.

What the history of this conflict has shown, time and again, is that the less opposition Israel encounters from its friends in the West for its dispossession of the Palestinians, the more uncompromising its behavior toward the Palestinians. And indeed, Olmert's reaction to Sarkozy's and Merkel's expressions of eternal solidarity and friendship have had exactly that result: Olmert announced his approval of massive new construction in East Jerusalem, authorising housing projects that were frozen for years by previous governments because of their destructive impact on the possibilities of a peace agreement, as well as continued expansion of Israel's settlements.

And Olmert's defense minister, Ehud Barak, declared shortly after Merkel's departure that he will not remove the over five hundred checkpoints and roadblocks currently preventing the recovery of a shattered Palestinian economy that Israel has repeatedly promised and repeatedly failed to implement. Whatever hope Palestinians may have had for a recovery of their economy as a consequence of the seven billion dollars in new aid promised by the international donor community in Paris last December was shattered by that announcement. The donor countries, not to speak of the private sector, will not pour good money after bad, as they so often have in the past, in these circumstances.

So what is required of statesmen is not more peace conferences, or clever adjustments to previous peace formulations, but the moral and political courage to end their collaboration with the massive hoax the peace process has been turned into. Of course, Palestinian violence must be condemned and stopped, particularly when it targets civilians. But is it not utterly disingenuous to pretend that Israel's occupation - maintained by IDF-manned checkpoints and barricades, helicopter gunships, jet fighter planes, targeted assassinations and military incursions, not to speak of the massive theft of Palestinian lands "annexed" by Israel - is not itself an exercise in continuous and unrelenting violence against over three million Palestinian civilians? If Israel were to renounce violence, could the occupation last even one day?

Israel's designs on the West Bank are not much different than the designs of the Arab forces that attacked the Jewish state in 1948 - the nullification of the international community's Partition Resolution of 1947. Short of addressing the problem by its right name - something that is of

an entirely different order than hollow statements that “settlements do not advance peace” - and taking effective collective action to end a colonial enterprise that disgraces what began as a noble Jewish national liberation struggle, further peace conferences, no matter how well intentioned, make their participants accessories to one of the longest and cruelest deceptions in the annals of international diplomacy.

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