

report PUBLIC JUSTICE

Fourth Quarter, 2006

Vol. 29, No. 4

No Justice, No Peace

by
Donald Kruse©

It has been about 60 years since the founding of the state of Israel by the action of the United Nations. Accordingly, for two generations of Israelis, there has been a Jewish state in the Middle East to defend and develop. Israel has survived and prospered despite many threats and alarms. In addition to its economic progress, it has also become one of the strongest military forces—including nuclear weapons—in the world. It is fair to say that Israel has enjoyed a modicum of justice since its creation out of the ashes of World War II.

The Palestinians, on the other hand, have lived those 60 years in exile, or under occupation, or as second-class citizens of Israel. Promises made to them that the world community would seek a “just solution” to the Palestinian problem have not been fulfilled. Only in the last several years have the world’s leaders, including the United States, even accepted the idea of a Palestinian state living alongside Israel. But, aside from words, very little action has occurred to bring statehood to the Palestinians. It is fairly obvious that the Palestinians have not obtained any real justice since 1948.

I state these well-known facts because many Americans see the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a struggle between two somehow equal forces without realizing the deep asymmetry between the two sides. Israel has had these 60 years to grow and flourish almost like any Western country has done. For the Palestinians, virtually nothing has been gained in two generations except the maintenance of their struggle for freedom and independence. Their lot has been refugee camps, Israeli jails, and a harsh military occupation. Rare indeed has been the Palestinian family that has not experienced injury or death. Living in the Israeli-occupied territories, no one has escaped the humiliation of foreign domination and oppression. It is clear, after 60 years of struggle, that there will be no peace in the Middle East without some justice for the Palestinians.

The year 2006 has thus far been a year of great tension and bloodshed in the Middle East, be it in Iraq or Gaza or Lebanon. Of course, the most violent experience has been in Iraq where over 150,000 American and other non-Iraqi troops are stationed and where deaths continue to mount. Whatever one may think about the origins and history of the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, I believe all will agree that the U.S. had no idea that so many American troops would still be required there three years later.

Most recently (as of the summer of 2006), serious conflicts have suddenly broken out in Gaza and Lebanon. These two areas border Israel and are part of the 60-year Arab-Israeli struggle, even though the government of Lebanon has sought to stay out of the Arab military struggle with Israel.

Iran has also figured prominently in 2006 in a behind-the-scenes role for Hezbollah and in strident rhetoric against Israel. In addition, Iran has been on center stage in its dealings with the U.N. and others—including the U.S.—which are seeking to prevent Tehran from developing nuclear weapons.

Widespread military action in the volatile Middle East causes deep concern around the world. But what can be done to tamp down the violence? The above-cited areas of conflict defy easy diagnosis and facile recommendations. Yet as the U.S. considers what it should be doing, policymakers would do well to look behind the daily events and the current cycle of action and reaction. Although American leaders seldom speak of U.N. Security Council Resolution 242 these days, it might be useful for the U.S. to consider how 242 could be deployed again at this time of crisis. Resolution 242 contains the famous land-for-peace formula, namely, that the Arabs would get back the lands lost in the 1967 war while Israel would get peace in return. This resolution has been one of the historic benchmarks of Middle East diplomacy ever since it was approved in 1967, following the Six-Day War. The resolution took six months to negotiate and its core wording insisted on “the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war and the need to work for a just and lasting peace in which every State in the area can live in security.”

Resolution 242 has already served as the framework for the Israel-Egypt peace treaty and the Israel-Jordan treaty. It could provide the means for Syria to enter the peace process as it holds out the promise to Syria of regaining the Golan Heights in return for accepting Israel. The Palestinians should be invited to join the 242 process in regard to the West Bank and Gaza. Actually, the Arab states, in their 2002 Peace Plan, have already accepted the land-for-peace formula. This fact should make it easier to get all Arab states to respond positively to a revival of 242. The resolution’s U.N. imprimatur (rather than a U.S. trademark) would also make it more acceptable universally. And there is no doubt that the European Union and many Third World countries would approve recourse to 242 once again.

If the U.S. is looking for a way forward to achieve peace in the Middle East, the 242 vehicle is available. Israel may prefer unilateral steps to joining in a 242 process, but

unfortunately for Israel, unilateral steps will not guarantee its acceptance by the Arab states and the rest of the world. Joining the 242 process would best assure Israel's security in the long term.

It is clearly in the national interest of the United States to put to rest, at long last, the explosive Arab-Israeli struggle. I believe that employing 242 could provide a tried and true venue and, perhaps, the best way to reengage all parties with the aim of a comprehensive peace agreement that would include all Arab states. If the U.S. were to take an initiative using 242, it could also do much to deflate anti-American anger in the Arab and Muslim world.

Next year it will be 40 years since 242 was approved as the first step towards Arab-Israeli peace. Surely the time has long since come to try to end this fight and to see the land-for-peace promise help lead the Middle East to a new future.

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Mr. Kruse served in the U.S. Foreign Service as a career diplomat until retirement. He was stationed at the American Consulate General in Jerusalem when the Egypt-Israel peace treaty was negotiated and signed and has followed closely Israeli and Palestinian issues for more than 25 years. Mr. Kruse also served as a trustee of the Center for Public Justice.