

IS PEACE BETWEEN PALESTINIANS AND ISRAELIS

ANY CLOSER?

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The focus of my teaching tonight is: “Is peace between Israelis and Palestinians any closer?”

Two weeks ago, Israelis celebrated and Palestinians mourned the 1948 war that created a Jewish state and led to the flight of 750,000 Palestinians. As *The Economist* reports, “After sixty anniversaries the fate of the two sides is as lopsided as ever. Israel is not just an established state but a dynamic and prosperous one. By contrast, the lot of the Palestinians is wretched. The state they were promised under the 1947 UN partition plan remains tantalizingly beyond reach.”

Despite this glowing affirmation for Israel, Israel still lives without peace and with existential dread – Hezbollah to the north, Hamas to the south, and the threat of a nuclear attack from Iran.

Most Israelis recognize the Palestinians must be granted a state of their own. Most Palestinians acknowledge that the state of Israel is here to stay. Nevertheless, both sides are stuck in the status quo.

It isn't supposed to be going this way. Last November, in Annapolis, Maryland, both Israel and the Palestinians committed themselves to a renewed peace process to achieve final status talks in the context of a two-state solution.

Six months later, the two sides are still far apart on the core issues of a final status deal that would culminate in the creation of a Palestinian state next to Israel: final borders between the two states, the status of Jerusalem, the disposition of the Israeli settlements in the west bank, and the fate of the now 4.5 million Palestinian refugees. Despite the publicly stated goal of reaching a peace agreement by the end of 2008, both sides would rather fight than make the extremely painful political compromises necessary to reach an equitable two-state solution.

As Tim McGirk observes in *Time* magazine, both Israelis and Palestinians are “so bound up in their own sense of victimization – the Israelis over the holocaust, the Palestinians over the loss of their land – that they are blind to the legitimate needs of the other.” And

so, like boxers in the ring, both sides seem to know only one thing: how to punch and counterpunch. The Palestinians fire rockets into Israel, Israel engages in air strikes. The Palestinians send suicide bombers, Israel engages in targeted assassinations and ground operations.

Having said all this, some small but encouraging developments are taking place. First, despite its public boycott of talks with Hamas, Israel privately talks with Hamas. With Egypt mediating negotiations, Israel and Hamas are slowly moving toward a possible six-month ceasefire.

Secondly, just yesterday, Israel and Syria simultaneously announced that they had resumed peace talks with one another., working through Turkish mediators. Of course, neither of these developments may bear fruit. Nevertheless, in the Middle East, positive change occurs only in baby steps if it is to occur at all.

In the Middle East, talking is always better than shooting.