

Palestine: The End of a Dream?

The creation of a Palestinian state seems to have fallen onto a backburner, with extremism and apathy hindering forward progress.

It's painful to see that the dream of a stable and lasting peace, with two states — Israel and Palestine — living side by side in peace and security, has all but disappeared. The only adverb that I refuse to admit is “permanently,” because while intellectual pessimism offers a bleak picture, the power to prevent a willful extinguishing of hope still endures.

At the moment, however, the reality of the situation would suggest a disastrous collapse. Israel is locked into self-absorption characteristic of modest leadership that lacks a vision. The Palestinian seems increasingly fragmented and evanescent, lacking in serious policies and devoid of dreams. The energy necessary to rekindle reconciliation process and avoid losing what's been built in recent decades seems absent.

Since only three decades ago all that existed were “Occupied Territories,” which included the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, it might be safe to assume that a long stretch of road has already been covered. Then came the first Intifada, where the weapons of choice were stones. After that the long and troubled odyssey that led to the 1993 Oslo Accords, which gave the world the striking image of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin shaking hands with Yasser Arafat in the White House garden presence of then-President Bill

Clinton, who spreads his arms wide, as if to enclose their former enemies.

Those hopeful events were followed by the act of a murdering Jew, right-wing extremist Yigal Amir, who shot and killed Rabin. Despite Rabin's martyrdom, peace could still walk on its own two feet, despite a host of difficulties. Clinton, by then at the end of his second term, continued to cultivate hopes outlined in the 1978 Camp David. Once again, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Arafat appeared to have the finish line in sight.

So close was the fulfillment of the dream that it vanished. Call it lack of courage, outright cowardice, or fear, but defeat was snatched from the jaws of victory. Soon came the second and bloodier Intifada, this one involving Kalashnikovs and suicide attacks by fanatics.

Another important opportunity arose when yet another Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon, decided to withdraw completely from Gaza and dismantle all Jewish settlements. But Sharon, a man of war who wanted to enter the history books as a man of peace, was stopped in his tracks by a devastating stroke. Shortly before, in Ramallah, Arafat, the historic founder of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestine National Authority (PNA), had been stricken with a long and bizarre illness that eventually led to his death

in a Paris military hospital in Paris, where he'd been transferred for life-saving treatment. It failed.

Today, his widow Suha, encouraged by a part of the Palestinian leadership, and working alongside Qatar's powerful Al-Jazeera TV network, is attempting to probe mysteries surrounding Arafat's death. Research conducted by a prestigious Lausanne lab discovered that some of Arafat personal belongings contained unexplained traces of Polonium; the same radioactive poison was used to murder Russian dissident Alexander Litvinenko in London. Foul play seems like a metaphor for all that's happening in Palestine, where immobility reigns. And where the first victim of that immobility is the human will.

So far, one paradox had proved ineradicable. The latest Palestinian elections, backed by the United States and the West hopes that Al Fatah would prevail, instead produced the opposite result. No one could challenge either the freedom or legality of the vote. The result put Hamas extremists in the driver's seat, and they've since become the absolute masters of Gaza. Gaza Prime Minister Ismail Haniye is little more than a kind of “bureaucratic” mayor. On the West Bank, in Ramhallah, Hamas elevated skilled technocrat Salam Fayyad to the job. A common sense figure, he produced a common sense slogan: “Let's create a



A Palestinian woman walks under a mural with the image of the late Yasser Arafat and the former spiritual leader of Hamas Sheikh Ahmed Yassin.

Palestinian state from the bottom up, and bit by bit we'll build up structures and institutions.”

Things went fairly well until global economic and financial crisis to root and wouldn't let go. Fayyad has proudly illustrated the extraordinary growth of the PNA, but often fails to mention that some of the force behind its growth was help from donor countries. Now that donor money has dried up, it's become difficult, if not impossible, to keep pace with civil servant salaries, a serious matter since the pay-rolled bureaucracy has grown from 130,000 to 200,000 people.

Writing in his newsletter, Janiki Cingoli, founder and president of the Italian Center for Peace in the Middle

East (CIPMO), who recently returned from Jerusalem, was anything but optimistic. “Fayyad has been deeply weakened, and the recent government reshuffle, while confirming him as prime minister, also saw the appointment a new finance minister, independent Nabil Khassis.”

In essence, PNA is paralyzed. The idea the divisions that divide the PNA and Hamas, secularists and extremists, can be reconciled, utopian. Despite countless words and pledges, there's no premise for concrete collaboration. The reasons are both domestic (too much distrust, in some cases the hatred between the two sides) and international. PNA President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) worries that an alliance between the two sides

would risk short-circuiting any future Western aid. Domestic elections are systematically postponed, even though Hamas is undergoing major internal changes. Khaled Meshal, a Hamas super-hawk who for years lived in exile in Damascus, is back, but with a far softer stance. He's now a key figure in the party's day-to-day life.

But it hasn't been enough. The divide between the two sides is still galactic and there isn't the slightest hint of a reviving of the peace process, which seems either dead or stuck in the muck of general indifference, or worse still, of apathy. There's hope of positive news from the United States, should President Barack Obama win reelection in November.

But even that seems illusory. How many times, after all, have outsiders choked on their own “ifs,” “whens” and “buts”? Until the last decade, at least some paths toward peace were evident and outlined. Today, it's a literal desert of the will.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu bides his time, focusing on other matters while continuing to accept the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Increasingly, Palestinians seem prisoners of their own suffocating divisions. “It takes two to tango,” Israeli Shimon Peres says often. But the problem here is both a lack of dancers and music to dance to.