

The Forgotten Reason for the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

“The U.S. Can Neither Ignore nor Solve the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict” was the headline of [Martin Indyk’s May 14 article in Foreign Affairs](#). Washington may not be able to end that conflict, he wrote, but must actively manage it.

Indyk, a former U.S. Special Envoy for Middle East Peace under President Barack Obama, and who served two separate terms as the U.S. Ambassador to Israel before that, urged the Biden Administration to manage the Arab-Israeli struggle in a way that helps create a political horizon for the Palestinians, “one that gives them hope that, like Israelis, they will eventually enjoy the ‘equal measures of freedom, security, prosperity, and democracy’ that Secretary of State [Antony] Blinken recently promised them.”

Indyk’s initial recommendations include a freeze on Israeli settlement growth and pressing Israel to avoid evictions and house demolitions in East Jerusalem. Then he makes the familiar point that once the immediate crisis is over the U.S. “will need to promote a process that helps rebuild trust and hope in the two-state solution.” An incremental, step-by-step process, Indyk concludes, “holds out more promise than either looking away or following the siren song of a final peace.”

This wish list is completely unrealistic. It is surprising that it came from an old Middle East hand, supposedly a realist, with long experience trying to manage and solve the Arab-Israeli conflict. [A flareup of that conflict](#), which erupted in Jerusalem on May 6, has degraded what little trust there was, reigniting old animosities and creating new ones. For the first time in a generation [mass protests erupted even among Israel’s Arab citizens](#), and rival gangs of Jewish and Arab youths fought in the streets.

The Egyptian-brokered [ceasefire happened on May 21](#). Even if it holds, both sides [appear freshly radicalized](#) and ready for more fights in the future. The scene is uncannily reminiscent of the 2014 [Gaza War](#). Back then Hamas also fired rockets at Israel, the Israel Defense Forces responded with massive air strikes, a truce was brokered by moderate Arab states, the civilian infrastructure in Gaza was badly damaged and eventually rebuilt, the dead (over 2,000 Arabs and 72 Israelis) were buried, and no core issue was resolved.

This spring will be more of the same. “A freeze on Israeli settlement growth,” as suggested by Indyk, is a political impossibility at a time when Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) is fighting for his political life and needs the support of the annexationist right. His allies now include [Itamar Ben-Gvir](#), leader of the openly supremacist Otzma Yehudit (“Jewish Power”) party, a former Kahanist who is now a Member of Knesset. Just before the latest Israeli general election on March 23, [Netanyahu](#) arranged an [alliance](#) between Otzma Yehudit and two other far-right parties, Noam and the Religious Zionist Party. This alliance [won six Knesset seats](#) in March and now enjoys huge leverage. It supports Netanyahu, but also insists on the ongoing program of settlement construction and further Jewish expansion into East Jerusalem.

[The latest crisis was a godsend](#) for Netanyahu. He did not engineer it, as some [Israeli pundits and politicians suspect](#), but it may help him cobble together yet another bare majority in the Knesset. To that end he cannot afford to soften his position on any contentious issue of primary concern to the Israeli right: on the settlements, on [the neighborhoods in east Jerusalem](#), or on the two-state solution.

“A Palestinian state will not be created, not like the one people are talking about,” Netanyahu [told an Israeli radio station in 2019](#). His position has steadily hardened since. Today, he may be willing to tolerate limited autonomy for the

disjointed Palestinian enclaves scattered across the West Bank, with no access to the Jordan River and no land border with anyone but Israel; and an overpopulated Gaza, with close to two million Arabs squeezed into 140 square miles, who are effectively at the mercy of Israel and an unsympathetic Egypt.

That “a Palestinian state will not be created” is more true today, however, than at any time since [the Oslo Accords were signed](#) in 1993. Even if Netanyahu is replaced—and his odds of retaining power look much better than only three weeks ago—his most likely successor is [his former Minister of Defense Naftali Bennett](#), a firm antagonist of Palestinian statehood, a staunch advocate for annexing more than 60 percent of the West Bank, and, accordingly, a foe of the two-state project.

Indyk is not any more likely to find anyone of stature on the Palestinian side who would agree “to promote a process that helps rebuild trust and hope in the two-state solution.” Hamas consistently advocates a single-state solution which entails the destruction of the Jewish state. With its radical position it wants to extend its influence to the West Bank, especially among the young, at the expense of the Fatah old guard which controls the Palestinian Authority (PA).

That old guard [is still led by Mahmoud Abbas, aka Abu Mazen](#). He has led the PA for the past 16 years of stagnation and dubious legitimacy, of failure to advance stated Palestinian objectives, and deep divisions within the community. Abbas is not any more ready than his late predecessor Yasser Arafat to accept the legitimacy of Israel’s permanent existence.

This religiously-rooted rejection excludes *a priori* any possibility of a lasting two-state solution. As I have [repeatedly pointed out](#), from the orthodox Muslim point of view, the struggle against Israel is more than a “war of national liberation”: it is *an act of worship* for which Allah grants the *mujahid* either victory in this life, or eternal bliss. Such contextualization of the conflict makes its

resolution structurally impossible. It is no longer stated in the secular, “rational” terms of power, territory, resources, and guarantees. Hamas and other Islamic groups are opposed to a permanent settlement because they firmly believe it would be against Allah’s will to grant any piece of land once controlled by the faithful to non-Muslim infidels.

This ideological obstacle on the Arab-Muslim side is still relevant. It has been largely ignored by Western media and analysts, which is a major oversight. Having toured the Middle East on four occasions over the past two years, I am acutely aware of its continuing relevance. My grim summary [following my 2018 visit to Lebanon](#) is still valid, likely more so than ever before: “My interlocutors of different faiths and political persuasions agree on at least one point: that there will be no lasting peace in our lifetime.”

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