

Why many Palestinians see no hope but to die resisting --

By Ed Abington, former US consul-General in Jerusalem

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I got back Saturday morning from ten days in Jerusalem and Ramallah where I met with many Palestinians and Israelis. I came back convinced more than ever that the two-state solution is dead as a doornail. There is absolutely no willingness on the part of the IDF to change the situation on the ground from the stranglehold they now have. In fact several Israelis said that there are an increasing number of IDF officers serving in the West Bank who live in the settlements and do everything they can to frustrate any dismantlement of roadblocks or other barriers. The head of a well-respected Israeli organization told me that former Defense Minister Amir Peretz's advisor for the West Bank said that the IDF does everything it can to frustrate positive changes on the ground per the Roadmap and Tony Blair's mission. The Israeli said Peretz's advisor said that the IDF had recruited Palestinian youngsters from Nablus to try to get through the Hawara checkpoint wearing a suicide belt. They were caught (since it was a set-up), the IDF trumpeted their arrest and used that to justify the continuing seige of Nablus. The boys were released within a short time after their arrest.

The Office of the UN Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs has the absolute best -- and most depressing -- power point presentation of the situation on the West Bank that I have seen, layering information on a map showing Palestinian cities and villages, areas a, b and c, closed military areas, Israeli-declared nature reserves, the separation barrier, settlements, including their master plan for development, the Israeli road network for settlements, barriers and roadblocks -- all of which puts forty percent of the West Bank off limit to Palestinians. When one looks at the presentation and sees how fragmented and disjointed the West Bank has become, and how East Jerusalem is almost totally surrounded by Israeli settlements, it is beyond imagination that there can ever be a viable Palestinian state.

There is a sense of despair among almost every Palestinian I talked to. They see no willingness on the part of the Israelis to engage in meaningful final status talks. In fact, they say, the talks are frozen, yet settlement expansion is going on at a steady and growing rate. Tenders for new housing units are being approved almost every day, not only in East Jerusalem but elsewhere in the West Bank. No Palestinian building for any purpose is allowed in area c, even if Palestinians have owned the land for generations. The IDF destroys any building done by Palestinians in area c. The West Bank is now truly fragmented by checkpoints, Israeli-only roads, closed military areas and permanent "border-crossing"-like terminals around all the major Palestinian cities. Someone shipping goods to or from Nablus, for example, must off-load/on-load their trucks at least twice on any trip.

The IDF has clamped down even tighter on the daily lives of Palestinians. Nabil Kassis, the president of Bir Zeit University, said that he has not been able to hire foreign faculty for the university for several years. The Israelis refuse to give foreign faculty work permits. In the past, foreigners would get a three month visa at the Israeli point of entry and after three months, go out to Jordan or elsewhere for a day or two and then come back in and get another three month visa. That practice has now been stopped by the Israelis, making it even more difficult for anyone in the West Bank who overstays their visa.

I found no Palestinian who had anything positive to say about Tony Blair's mission. One Palestinian involved in negotiations said Blair comes two or three days a month and spends only a couple of hours with the Palestinians. They see no positive changes on the ground as a result of his efforts. I heard that a State Department official will shortly join the Blair mission as chief of party. One wag unkindly commented that his assignment was the rare example of a rat jumping on a sinking ship.

The situation in Gaza is truly horrific and on the brink of a humanitarian disaster. UNRWA says fully 80 percent of the people in Gaza depend on food aid to meet the absolute minimum daily caloric intake. UNRWA only supplies 60 percent of daily food requirements to the refugees to whom it distributes food packets and depends on a functioning economy to supply the rest. The economy in Gaza, however, is close to collapse. Unemployment is over 50 percent and rising. Many factories have

closed down altogether and have laid off their workers because they can't get inputs into Gaza nor distribute their products.

The agricultural sector is collapsing. The IDF allows no fertilizer into Gaza, nor chicken feed, very little fuel, no spare parts for the water and sewage systems and is increasingly cutting off supplies of electricity. At least forty percent of Gaza City is permanently without electricity and the situation is even worse in other parts of the Gaza Strip. The Palestinians are pumping tens of thousands of cubic meters of raw, untreated sewage into the Med because sewage plants are breaking down. There is a huge reservoir of raw sewage in northern Gaza that could flood villages at any time. Ground water is increasingly being contaminated (it has been increasingly saline for some time). Drinking water is increasingly untreated because of a deterioration in the water treatment system due to a lack of spare parts, creating the danger of a pandemic in Gaza. UNRWA is worried about malnutrition and seeing signs of stress in pregnant women, usually the harbinger of malnutrition. Undernutrition is widespread among children and adults.

In general, Palestinians recognize that it is only the international community that is keeping Gaza from collapsing altogether, but Palestinians hold out little hope that the international community will do much to make the situation better. And the Bush Administration is seen as aligning itself totally with Israel on punishing Gaza and unwilling to do much of anything to persuade Israel to ease the pressure on Gaza. I heard one anecdote that summarized US impotence vis-a-vis Israel. The Consulate in Jerusalem sent a Palestinian from Gaza to the US on a Fulbright fellowship. The Palestinian scholar returned to Amman almost a year ago but has been unable to get back to Gaza. The US has been putting him up in a hotel in Amman and paying him per diem for close to a year. His plight reminds me of the Tom Hanks movie, *The Terminal*, of someone who got stuck at JFK for a year because his country went out of existence.

There seems to be a sense that sooner or later, the IDF will go into Gaza in a big way to try to destroy the Hamas government and its infrastructure, which will make the humanitarian situation even worse, as well as result in heavy casualties. Despite the grim situation in Gaza, no Palestinian I talked to thought Hamas was in the slightest danger of being overthrown. Fatah in the West Bank has done little or nothing to rehabilitate itself, some two years after the 2006 parliamentary elections.

There is uncertainty what will happen when Mahmoud Abbas' term of office expires in January 2009. One Palestinian said that the Presidency is considering a draft election law, which would be promulgated by president decree since the Legislative Council has not met (and cannot meet) for over a year. Interestingly, the draft election law states that legislative and presidential elections will be held in 2010, thereby giving Abu Mazin another year in office. I don't know whether this is true or not, but so much for the Bush Administration emphasis on democracy. Palestinians to whom I spoke could see no way, in any case, that elections could be held, given the political fragmentation between the West Bank and Gaza. And elections held only in the West Bank (and perhaps East Jerusalem) would have zero credibility.

Palestinians see Salam Fayyad as imposed upon them by the Bush Administration. Some Fatah members were critical of Fayyad, probably because Fatah no longer feeds at the public trough. Other Palestinians praised his efforts but suggested that if neither the US nor the Israelis (much less other members of the Quartet) were doing much to make Fayyad succeed, then what hope is there?

I first went to Gaza and the West Bank and have been returning regularly for the past fifteen years, although this is my first visit for 14 months. I always think the situation could not get worse, at least since 2000 and the outbreak of the second intifada, but somehow it does. I fully expect that conditions will be even worse on the ground when I next visit.

Ed Abington is a former U.S. Consul-General in Jerusalem