

Open to Debate



Don't get your hopes up. There have been many false dawns in the Middle East, starting with the Holy Land. Will it be any different now?

I do not think so. As I write, Benjamin Netanyahu, the hard-line former Israeli prime minister, now finance minister, has recently been heckled by right-wing extremists angered by plans to withdraw Jewish settlers from Gaza. (A plate was thrown and his car tires slashed during a wedding.) These Israeli extremists are a tiny minority, ultranationalist settlers, mostly American, I'm afraid, and they maintain a stranglehold over more reasonable Israelis. The other side is just as bad, if not worse. Islamic militants are as opposed to peace as Jewish hardliners, the difference being that the Israelis can control their gangsters, whereas Mahmoud Abbas cannot.

The first steps to the peace process are easy: a ceasefire, Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, and the creation of a Palestinian mini-state. Then comes the hard part. After Gaza, what else is Sharon willing to give up? He has said little about the West Bank, the jewel of the crown, as they say. What about the settlements, the status of Jerusalem, the borders of the mini-state, the wall, and the return of the refugees? George W. Bush has said that there will be no right of return for Palestinian refugees to Israel. Can Abbas carry the can on this one? I don't think so.

What Bush should say is that refugees should be compensated, that they have rights to the West Bank, and that Jerusalem should be shared. If Bush talked about freedom for Palestinians in the same voice as he does where Iraq is concerned, perhaps Israeli hardliners would get the message. But this he does not do. The Israel lobby would make mincemeat of him quicker than you can say AIPAC.

Islamic militants dream of the glories of the caliphate in the Holy Land, just as Israeli militants dream that they are bringing about the coming of the Messiah. The problem seems insoluble, a pipedream. And yet people are trying.

The debate is a Greek invention, one that has served us well throughout the ages. I recently attended one in London, at Intelligence Squared, or IQ2, as it calls itself. This debating forum is new, but it has been so successful it threatens to overtake the Oxford Union as Europe's *numero uno* debating society. As it happens, I escorted Jemima Goldsmith, Sir James's beautiful daughter, Jemima being Hugh Grant's squeeze and a very precious escort to be sure, not because of her beauty, but because of her Jewishness. (Tempers are prone to be lost when Jews and the Palestinians are involved in debate, so I was covering my flanks).

The format was simple. Three on each side, nine minutes each, followed by a vote. The place was sold out—900 people, give or take a few. The motion was "Is Zionism the Real Enemy of the Jews?" All six debaters were Jewish, some of them Israelis. What struck me was the tone, both of the debaters as well as of the audience. There were no insults, no screams of outrage, no recriminations. During the question and answer period, people remained polite and very civil. (There could be no such debate in, say, the Big Bagel, as I call New York City, because of the intolerance so many backers of Israel feel toward anyone who disagrees with them where Israel is concerned.)

Here it is in a nutshell: the anti-motion speakers agreed that the Holocaust

should not give the Jews and Israel any moral immunity from criticism—BUT—that the vilification of Israel by certain European newspapers has long superseded what may be defined as legitimate criticism and that UN resolutions are devoted to human rights abuses in Israel but ignore the real abuses elsewhere. The point I liked the best was that Israel is the only nation whose civilian courts have such a broad jurisdiction over military actions. All very true and well presented.

The pro-motion speakers were more vigorous, especially a British academic and an Israeli journalist. Ariel Sharon, we were told, personifies the xenophobic, aggressive, and expansionist brand of Zionism. He has waged a savage war against the Palestinians, and his policies include the confiscation of their lands, the demolition of their houses, the curfews, the roadblocks, the systematic abuse of Palestinian human rights, and the illegal wall, which they said is as much about land-grabbing as it is about security. An Israeli journalist spoke about how uncomfortable she felt in the role of Member of the Master Race and how Israel's behavior has led to the upsurge of the new anti-Semitism throughout the world.

Of course, I agreed with her. Israel's mistreatment of the Palestinians has turned into a great liability and a moral burden, and only Jewish fanatics refuse to see this undeniable truth. But what about the suicide bombers, cry the militant Zionists. Well, it is a cruel irony that a country that was built out of the desert as a haven for Jews after the war has turned into the least safe place on earth for Jews to live. Militants on both sides should reflect a bit on this, and I expect Jews to think about it more, as they have much more to lose than those who have nothing. ■

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