

What are the consequences of the current decline in peace prospects and the growth of Israeli ultra-nationalism and orthodox religiosity for the United States and the American Jewish community?

A. The Israeli right-wing mainstream looks increasingly foreign in the eyes of the liberal American Jewish mainstream. Here we confront a new-style Jewish culture war. Settlement-spread and opposition to pluralist conversion and pluralist prayer at the Wall are only part of the problem. The Israeli right is increasingly defining Zionism and loyalty in terms of Orthodox "values" that alienate both a large portion of Israelis and a majority of American Jews. Some American Jewish supporters of a democratic and Jewish Israel who are fervent, lifelong Zionists have been denied entry to Israel, the Jewish homeland, because of their opposition to policies that hurt Israel's chances of remaining democratic and Jewish.

The Trump administration, whose Jewish supporters and peace-process emissaries seem to be mainly Orthodox and pro-settlement, is effectively also taking its distance from the American Jewish mainstream. It is not clear where its isolationist inclinations might lead. Factor in growing global anti-Semitism and American confusion over the BDS movement. The upshot is damage to what I call the "strategic triangle": Israel, the US, and American Jewry.

The big losers are Israel and the American Jewish mainstream. Traditionally, they have been reliable allies. As their alliance threatens to erode, both are weakened in terms of identity and solidarity. This is a gathering storm of strategic consequences for Jews everywhere.

You paint a somber picture. What can Americans for Peace Now and Shalom Achshav do about this?

A. Now more than ever, Israeli society has to be shown a mirror that describes where the slippery slope—its ugly reality—is taking it. And America and its Jewish community have to be told what the damage is: damage to the noble Zionist ideal and to the only functioning democracy in the Middle East. These are the tasks that APN has undertaken in the US and Shalom Achshav in Israel.

Alone on the Israeli scene, Shalom Achshav tells Israelis and the world the precise dimensions of settlement spread on the West Bank—what are called "legal", "illegal" and "unauthorized" settlements in Israel's increasingly Orwellian doublespeak—and just how this erodes the prospects for a two-state solution. Shalom Achshav charted a 34 percent growth in settlement starts in 2016. Along with a handful of embattled advocacy organizations in Israel, Shalom Achshav also chronicles the abuse of human rights and civil rights in the occupied territories.

Still, it sounds like you're saying the two-state solution is a lost cause . . .

A. Absolutely not. One of the things I've learned in following Israeli-Palestinian and Israel-Arab issues for more than 50 years is that, for better or for worse, nothing is written in stone in the Middle East. This is a highly volatile region where game-changing events surprise us overnight.

Examples? The 1973 Yom Kippur War with its traumatic loss of life that paradoxically changed Israelis' attitudes about peace with Egypt for the better. Anwar Sadat's 1977 initiative to come to Israel, which almost instantly persuaded Israelis that peace was more important than occupying the Sinai Peninsula. Or recall how, in March 1997, after a Jordanian soldier shot and killed seven Israeli schoolgirls near the border—an act that threatened the nascent Jordanian-Israeli peace—King Hussein made dramatic condolence calls on all seven families, some of whom were so moved they told him, "be our king, too."

Then too, leadership changes can be crucial. Who thought in early 1977 that Menachem Begin would make peace with Egypt? In Ramallah, who will follow Abu Mazen?

The two-state solution is an imperative because a Jewish and democratic Israel is an imperative and the only way to achieve and maintain that goal is by Palestinians having their own state next to Israel. This issue is far less about "love thy neighbor" than about "love yourself". Right now, the prospects are dim. But we need to keep the two-state option open and functional, looking to the day when circumstances will render it not only an imperative but an immediate opportunity. Experience teaches us that the circumstances will present themselves, almost certainly unexpectedly. We must be ready to grab them.

Shalom Achshav is maintaining that readiness. I know from talking to them that even some right-wing Israelis and settler circles are grudgingly aware of this. Americans for Peace Now supports Shalom Achshav in Israel. In Washington, APN confronts the halls of power with the disastrous outcome of US support for the Netanyahu government's West Bank policies and avoidance of vigorous steps toward a two-state solution.

I have noted that, sadly, we are currently on a slippery slope toward an ugly one-state reality. How we extricate ourselves depends on many factors. Some of these we may not be able to control, like the vicissitudes of Middle East Islamism conflicts. But a lot, an awful lot, depends on Israelis and American Jews.

We are not fighting windmills. We are fighting for the only option that will garner an Israel faithful to the vision of its founders. That is why, on the eve of the Jewish New Year, Americans for Peace Now and Shalom Achshav are more important than ever. Shana Tova!

APN Special Rosh HaShanah Q & A with Yossi Alpher Erev Rosh HaShana, Peace Prospects for the Coming Year

Yossi Alpher is an Israeli Security expert. He writes *Hard Questions, Tough Answers*, a weekly Q&A for Americans for Peace Now. Alpher served in the IDF as an intelligence officer, followed by years in the Mossad. He was associated with the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies (JCSS) at Tel Aviv University, ultimately serving as Director. He co-founded and co-administered *bitterlemons.net*, a Palestinian-Israeli and Arab-Israel dialogue site. Since 1992, Alpher has coordinated several Track II dialogues between Israelis and Arabs, and he served as Special Adviser to Israeli PM Ehud Barak during the 2000 Camp David Summit. In 2001, he published *And The Wolf Shall Dwell With The Wolf: the Settlers and the Palestinians*.

In February of 2015, Yossi Alpher published *PERIPHERY: Israel's Search for Middle East Allies*. In his current book, *No End of Conflict*, Alpher explains how Israel got into its present situation of growing isolation, political stalemate, and gathering political stagnation.

Contact Americans for Peace Now (APN) for financial information and a full description of programs.

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Does the absence of a Palestinian state threaten Israel? How?

A. Yes, it threatens Israel, and in more ways than one.

Without an Arab-state political affiliation for the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Israel is universally seen as their occupier. Not a single state in the world recognizes the terms "Judea and Samaria" or Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem. The possibility of restoring a pre-1967 political link, say by affiliating the West Bank in some way with Jordan, has ceased to be realistic in Arab eyes for several decades. This is so despite the fact that some Israeli right-wingers cut off from regional realities and international standards of human rights argue that West Bank Palestinians could enjoy autonomy under Israel and vote in Jordanian elections.

Nor is the paternalistic proposal put forth by some on the Israeli right—to the effect that Palestinians in the West Bank can in perpetuity enjoy "human" rights but not citizenship rights on the land where they live—viable in the eyes of Palestinians or anyone else in the world. Palestinian Arabs today identify as Palestinians in a political sense. If they cannot achieve sovereign statehood, the only fallback position they are likely to recognize is Israeli citizenship within the framework of a single state.

This brings us to the demographic issue. Most demographers today argue that there are already more Arabs than Jews in the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean. Some on the Israeli right argue that the totality of Arabs is "only" 40 percent of the total population, meaning Jews constitute 55 percent (another five percent of Israelis are neither Jewish nor Arab). In some cases this figure is achieved by ignoring the two million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, a highly problematic geopolitical determination. In other cases it is achieved by radically underestimating the number of Palestinians in the West Bank and ignoring the 300,000 Palestinians in East Jerusalem.

One way or another, even an Israeli state with a 40 percent (and growing!) Arab minority cannot claim to be intrinsically Jewish. As for a non-democratic state that favors its Jewish over its Arab inhabitants, this is anathema to the vast majority of Jews, to say nothing of the international community. It places Israel in the global family of racist, fascist countries whose prospects for enlightened progress are zero.

Okay, so we need a peace process. As of late summer 2017, can we say that an Israeli-Palestinian peace process exists?

A. No, certainly not in the by-now traditional sense of negotiations between two high-level delegations regarding a final status agenda. That format has not existed for around a decade. Nor is the Trump administration actively sponsoring a genuine process.

Rather, what Washington is trying to advance are what are termed confidence-building measures, beginning with "economic peace" gestures by Israel. These include projects like Israeli electricity supply to the northern West Bank. Then too, the Palestinian Authority now has a place alongside Israel and Jordan in the "Red-Dead" scheme for refilling the Dead Sea with Red Sea water and creating electricity and desalinated water in the process. Here and there, US peace facilitator Jason Greenblatt is reportedly encouraging new inter-religious and people-to-people schemes as well.

None of this is new. Even the economic measures were in the works for years before being conveniently inaugurated lately. Nor, as this weekly Q & A column has frequently pointed out, is there any evidence that "economic peace", however beneficial and welcome for Palestinians' quality of life, facilitates political peace or even relative tranquility between Israelis and Palestinians.

Moreover, even here we encounter vested interests and local political calculations that are sabotaging progress. Thus, while Israel offers measures to improve the West Bank economy, Palestinian Authority and Palestine Liberation Organization leader Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) has been conspicuously reducing the flow of funds from Ramallah to Gaza in an apparent effort to choke Gaza's Hamas leadership into submitting to his will. For example, the PA has cut Gazan salary remunerations and fuel subsidies, thereby severely exacerbating the Strip's electricity and sanitation crises. For its part, the Netanyahu government has reneged on a measure that would enable the West Bank town of Qalqilya to build thousands of badly needed housing units on "Area C" land held by Israel; the prime minister yielded to pressure from influential settler circles.

These and similar disruptive acts are productive of poverty and suffering, not peace. This means that even the Trump administration's problematic economic peace initiatives do not enjoy the full cooperation of dedicated Israeli and Palestinian peace partners.

What is currently preventing a genuine political peace process?

A. We have just alluded to some of the guilty parties. For one, Netanyahu and his coalition are ultra-nationalist and pro-settler in orientation. They are so extreme they cannot even cooperate fully in measures of economic peace—traditionally a favorite project of the Israeli right with its patronizing attitude toward Palestinians.

Then too, Abu Mazen has proven incapable of compromising on "narrative" negotiating issues like the "right of return" of 1948 refugees and the Temple Mount. Here, hard-line Palestinian positions constitute deal-breakers for any Israeli government. And the Palestinian leader's punitive attitude toward Gazans and their Hamas leadership merely underlines the fact that the Palestinian polity Abu Mazen claims to represent is hopelessly divided politically, ideologically and geographically.

But not only are Palestinians divided; the entire Arab world has in recent years descended into chaos and violence, some of it visible just across Israel's northern border with Syria. The collapse of Arab states like Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya hardly suggests an atmosphere conducive to discussing the creation of a new Arab state called Palestine.

Finally, as if problematic Israeli and Palestinian leadership were not bad enough, the vital element of American leadership is absent. President Trump and his peace team with their pro-settlement leanings and lack of knowledge and experience regarding the Israel-Arab conflict hardly inspire confidence. Trump in particular seems incapable of articulating even the territorial or "real estate" dimensions of the "ultimate deal" he claims to promote.

Don't Israelis want a Jewish and democratic state?

A. All the polls show that a majority of Israel's Jewish population does indeed want a Jewish and democratic state. But the polls also say that a majority does not believe it is currently possible to reach a stable two-state solution that enables Israel to remain Jewish and democratic. Here a number of issues have to be factored in if we want to understand the direction Israel is taking.

One is the totality of regional and local developments militating against the two-state solution needed for Israel to be Jewish and democratic. We have already noted regional chaos and Palestinian divisiveness and their effect on the attractiveness of creating a Palestinian state. In Israel, this atmosphere produces schools of thought that endorse the two-state solution but argue that the security risks render such a solution—or even a unilateral Israeli withdrawal—impossible or unwise until further notice. Meanwhile, the spread of settlements ensures that such a solution will be ever more difficult to implement in the future.

Then there is growing religiosity, expressed in emphasis on "religious Zionist values" in the education system and the establishment. The broad thrust of Israel's ultra-nationalist Orthodox direction tends to devalue non-Jews and prioritize the Jewish right to the Land of Israel. Accordingly, we confront the growing range of paternalistic schemes for Israel to hold onto all the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean mentioned above.

The traumatic memory of second intifada suicide bombings (2000-2004) continues to haunt many otherwise peace-oriented Israelis. The political left's failure to make good on the Oslo process discredits the political opposition to Netanyahu. Some of the political and intellectual leaders of Israel's Arab population (one out of five Israelis) espouse a more extreme position than the PLO and demand that Israel become a bi-national rather than a Jewish state, thereby contributing to Jewish suspicions of Palestinian end-goals. The prime minister himself skillfully invokes terrorist and Holocaust images to exploit all these fears and hesitations.

What's wrong with Netanyahu's "top down" process that prioritizes improved relations with moderate Arab states based on the Arab Peace Initiative?

A. The Arab Peace Initiative (API), dating back to 2002, offers Israel normalization of relations with the Arab world, but only after Israel reaches comprehensive peace agreements with all its neighbors, including the Palestinians and Syria. No Israeli government has ever endorsed the API. Welcome as that initiative is, it nevertheless comprises several highly problematic demands regarding refugees, and insists on Israel making peace with Syria even when that country is in tatters and its leadership is butchering its own citizens.

Netanyahu is exploiting the Arab world's current state of disarray. He is leveraging the fact that Israel and many Sunni Arab states share a preoccupation with the dual threat posed by ISIS and Iranian encroachment. He suggests that the Arab states reverse the order of the API: first normalize relations with Israel, only after which will Israel ostensibly be better able, with the Arab world's help and support (and pressure on the Palestinians to compromise), to solve the Palestinian conflict.

Netanyahu has made a modicum of progress in this direction, but only in the security field. Strategic cooperation with Egypt and Jordan has expanded; security ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE are now openly acknowledged. Looking farther afield, countries as disparate as Greece and Azerbaijan, India and Ethiopia have entered into productive economic and security cooperation with Israel while barely paying lip service to the Palestinian issue. All share concern over militant Islam and all recognize that Israel has something to offer them in this regard. Hence Netanyahu is not currently under heavy international pressure regarding the Palestinians.

But none of these strategic partners has suddenly begun to vote for Israel in the United Nations. No Arab state has publicly warmed up relations with Israel. None has agreed to reverse the API's sequence of comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian, Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Lebanese peace first, followed only afterwards by normalization. It is safe to predict that if and when calm and stability are restored in the Arab world, many of these fair-weather friends of Israel will melt away.

Worst of all, precisely because the pressure is light and the peace process nonexistent, Netanyahu and the pro-settler ultra-nationalist right wing continue to swallow up West Bank territory and lead Israel down a slippery slope toward some sort of very ugly one-state reality. As matters stand, that end-result will be either Jewish and not democratic, meaning apartheid, or democratic but not Jewish, meaning bi-national. In either case this will be a highly conflicted and very ugly entity.

