

Peace in Palestine, Peace in Israel

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AG - Patrick Seale - America's gross bias in Israel's favour -- together with the war in Iraq eagerly promoted by the neo-conservatives -- has contributed to fuelling unprecedented hostility to the United States throughout the Arab and Muslim world. At one extreme, it has fed the terrorism of Al-Qaida; at another, it is responsible for the victory of Hamas in the Palestinian elections on 25 January, but also the defiance of Iran, Syria and Hizballah, each rebelling in its own way against American-Israeli hegemony.

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New Actors on the Middle East Scene

Patrick Seale

Agence Global

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America's monopoly of Middle East peacemaking has been a spectacular failure. New actors are now getting involved, and the word that emerges from Ankara, Tehran and Moscow is that Hamas is ready for peace if Israel will finally reciprocate real concessions.

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For the past fifteen years, if not longer -- and certainly since the Madrid conference of 1991 -- the United States has monopolised the so-called Arab-Israeli peace process.

The U.S. has had no serious competitors for the task. The Soviet Union's collapse temporarily removed it from the Middle East scene, while even the European Union was for years not allowed to play a significant role, largely because Israel accused it of being "pro- Arab." Israel was happy for its American ally to be the sole peace-broker knowing that it was able to shape American policy for its own benefit.

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During Bill Clinton's presidency, the influence of American officials such as Dennis Ross and Martin Indyk, known for their pro-Israeli sympathies, ensured that Israel faced no pressure to end its occupation of Palestinian territory. Worse was to follow from the Arab point of view when, following George W. Bush's election to the presidency, pro-Israeli neo-conservatives secured powerful positions in the main branches of the American administration, notably in the Pentagon, the Vice-President's office and the National Security Council, as well as in several influential Washington think-tanks.

As a result, America's monopoly of Middle East peacemaking has been a spectacular failure. The situation on the ground today is far worse than it was at the time of the Madrid peace conference a decade and a half ago. One statistic is enough to show the extent of the damage: In 1991, there were fewer than 90,000 Jewish settlers in Palestinian territory beyond Israel's 1967 borders. Today there are about 460,000 on the West Bank and in and around Arab East Jerusalem, while Palestinian society has been besieged, crushed, humiliated and impoverished.

The situation is so bad that some observers believe that a two-state solution of the conflict -- that is an independent Palestinian state living side-by-side with Israel -- is now virtually unobtainable.

America's gross bias in Israel's favour -- together with the war in Iraq eagerly promoted by the neo-conservatives -- has contributed to fuelling unprecedented hostility to the United States throughout the Arab and Muslim world. At one extreme, it has fed the terrorism of Al-Qaida; at another, it is responsible for the victory of Hamas in the Palestinian elections on 25 January, but also the defiance of Iran, Syria and Hizballah, each rebelling in its own way against American-Israeli hegemony.

Anxiety about the current explosive situation has brought new actors onto the Middle East scene, notably Turkey and Russia, both anxious to play a mediating role in the conflict and enhance their own importance.

The hostility of Turkish public opinion to the United States may be gauged by the enormous success of a recent Turkish film, *Iraq, the Valley of the Wolves*, highly critical of American policy. Meanwhile, Turkish diplomacy has been active in both Iraq and Palestine. On 28 February, Turkey received Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari and will play host to the Shi'a firebrand Moqtada al-Sadr next week. Turkey has also braved the anger of both the United States and Israel by receiving a Hamas delegation led by Khaled Mish'al, head of the

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movement's political bureau.

Ankara -- and Teheran as well -- have, in fact, broken the U.S.-Israeli boycott of Hamas by arguing that Hamas is a legitimate actor on the Palestinian scene with whom the international community must engage. Russia has, in turn, adopted this position by playing host to Mish'al and his delegation this past week.

The word that emerges from Ankara, Tehran and Moscow is that Hamas is ready for peace on condition that Israel withdraw to its 1967 frontiers, release thousands of Palestinian political prisoners and demolish the separation wall. If Israel stops its attacks, Hamas will end its violence. Hamas spokesmen repeat that the movement is ready for a long-term truce with the Jewish state, extending over decades. In other words, Hamas policy is not to beg for favours from Israel but to demand reciprocity.

In intervening directly in the Arab-Israeli conflict, Vladimir Putin's Russia is challenging America's monopoly of the peace process while seeking to regain the influence it once had in a vital region not far from its southern borders. Sky-high prices for oil and gas have lent muscle to Russian diplomacy.

A promising development is that a large part of Israeli opinion is beginning to realise that the illegal seizure and settling of Palestinian territory has been an expensive mistake, absorbing billions of dollars and preventing Israel's peaceful integration in the region. The new centre-right party, Kadimah, dominated by former Likud "princes," now recognises that a two-state solution might be in Israel's interest after all. The problem is that its members may have awakened too late from their dream of a Greater Israel to be able to come to terms with reality.

Patrick Seale is a leading British writer on the Middle East, and the author of *The Struggle for Syria*; also, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East*; and *Abu Nidal: A Gun for Hire*.

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