



Opinion and Analysis, Week ending 8 May 2014

1. Memorial Day in Israel

Naomi Ragen

Friends, I wrote this a few years back, and I can't think of a single word I'd add. I share it with you again.

Every blessing,

Naomi

<http://unitedwithisrael.org/the-jewish-blessing/>

2. Why (Israeli-Palestinian) negotiations collapsed

Alexander Joffe, Middle East Forum, 3 May 2014

Recognizing Israel as a Jewish state is, for Abbas and the Palestinian leadership, if not the majority of Palestinians, a declaration that Jews have historic rights as a nation and a people, not simply a religion. Such a declaration would end the conflict once and for all by mandating that a Jewish nation-state may stand alongside a Palestinian state. And for those reasons it was out of the question.

<http://www.meforum.org/3815/israel-palestinian-ngotiations-collapsed>

3. The tragic history of the two-state solution

Jeffrey Goldberg, San Diego Source, 2 May 2014

The Palestinians, and their appointed (or un-appointed) Arab representatives, have passed up numerous opportunities over an almost 80-year period to divide Palestine among its two native peoples, Arabs and Jews.

<http://www.sddt.com/News/article.cfm?SourceCode=20140502co&t=The+Tragic+History+of+the+TwoState+SolutionJeffrey+Goldberg#.U2d-qKuonN>

4. The heavens shine on Israel

David Weinberg, Israel Hayom, 2 May 2014

My net assessment of Israel's strategic and internal situation is astonishingly optimistic. In overall perspective, Israel is stronger than any of its enemies. Neither the perpetual Palestinian conundrum, nor the acute Iranian threat to Israel, nor the unstable regional situation, make me a pessimist. Nor do Kerry's miserable prophecies

http://www.israelhayom.com/site/newsletter_opinion.php?id=8251

5. Note to the USA: We're not children

Einat Wilf, CNN, 1 May 2014

The dispute between the Arabs and the Jews, between the Palestinians and the Israelis, and the story of the return of the Jewish people to their homeland, is unique and unparalleled in

human history. The fact that the two sides are finding it difficult to reach a compromise and make the necessary "tough decisions," to quote the U.S. president, should therefore come as no surprise. <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2014/05/01/note-to-u-s-were-not-children/>

6. Palestinian Unity: An awkward product of Israel's indifference
Michael Bell, *The Globe and Mail*, 30 April 2014

My best bet is that the challenges confronting a unity government, lack of any real trust and the ongoing internecine competition for power will torpedo these efforts. We and the antagonists will be stuck with the no war/no peace reality that has perpetually dogged relations between Israelis and Palestinians and from which there seems no way out. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/palestinian-unity-born-of-impossible-circumstances-unlikely-to-last/article18337666/>

7. Moving beyond the doomed 'peace process'
Amir Taheri, *New York Post*, 30 April 2014

The demand for a return to pre-1967 borders is bizarre, to say the least. In 1967, there were no borders, just ceasefire lines drawn in 1948 — lines that symbolized an unstable status quo that led to two wars. Going back to them means returning to a situation that breeds war, not peace. <http://nypost.com/2014/04/30/moving-beyond-the-doomed-peace-process/>

8. Israel, Kerry is one of your best friends
Jeremy Ben-Ami, *CNN*, 30 April 2014

Friends of Israel should start by thanking Kerry for his commitment to Israel and supporting him as he seeks to break the present impasse in negotiations. <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/04/30/opinion/ben-ami-kerry-israel/index.html?iref=allsearch>

9. Palestinian-Israeli talks: time for a "time-out"
Shai Feldman, *The National Interest*, 29 April 2014

Given the importance that the exercise of leverage will assume in any successful recalibration of America's approach, none of this will succeed without President Obama deciding that this is *really* a top priority. http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/palestinian-israeli-talks-time-%E2%80%9Ctime-out%E2%80%9D-10354?utm_source=Mailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=*Mideast%20Brief&utm_campaign=Mideast%20brief%204-30-14

1. Memorial Day in Israel: "The Jewish Blessing" -
By Naomi Ragen

In the book of Genesis, G-d tells Abraham: "And through you will all the nations of the earth be blessed."

I've often wondered about that blessing we Jews are supposed to bring the world, and how it will come about. If it were up to me, right now, I don't think I'd be very eager to fulfil such a role. After six months of having the world heap the vilest slander on my people and my

country; after going through Holocaust Memorial Day, and now the Memorial Day for Israel's fallen soldiers, I don't think, if it was up to me, that heaping blessings on the world, particularly my Semitic neighbours, would be high on my list of "must do's."

However, since I know the Jewish people's particular fate isn't something you get to vote on, I recognize that I, and my fellow Jews will have very little say about this blessing thing either. And so, willy-nilly, we are going to bring blessing to the world. And I've finally figured out how.

It was last night, **watching the official memorial service for Israel's fallen soldiers at the Western Wall.** And in that holy place, Israel's top general, its chief of staff, got up to speak.

What do you think he spoke about, the general and army man? If he were any other nationality or religion, and this were any country but Israel, we wouldn't have to ask: The glory of our fallen heroes. Their bravery on the battlefield, their sacrifice. The greatness of our victories.

But not Israel's Chief of Staff, Shaul Mofaz. He spoke about remembering the birth of a child. The first picture taken in kindergarten. The first baby tooth that falls. The bar mitzvah pictures. The graduation from high school. The mother's kiss on the cheek of the new recruit. He spoke about the incalculable loss that each human being who dies in war is to his family, his parents, his grandparents, his brothers, sisters, girlfriend, wife, children.

About the preciousness of life, and the horror of death.

Long before I became an Israeli and a resident of Jerusalem, I lived in America where I experienced numerous memorial days. There were the red, white and blue flags. But mostly, there were sales. I don't think I ever saw the face of a single fallen American soldier on any television show let alone a day's worth of shows devoted exclusively to soldiers killed in action, or in traffic accidents, or in terrorist attacks.

Memorial Day in Israel is like nothing else, I dare say, anywhere in the world. The country simply shuts down all distractions. Restaurants, bars, discos close down. Radio and television channels spend the day showing old pictures and new videos of soldiers who died five months, or thirty years ago.

And the programs all emphasize the same thing: The man's childhood, his home, his parents, his wife or girlfriend. The silly pictures from his high school parties. The smiling face of the little boy dressed up for Purim. The words of the friends, who never stop mourning, who never forget. And for one day, every single person in Israel who identifies with the Jewish state, and the lives of the people who live there, feel these men and women are part of their own past, their own family. We weep because we've lost them, weep as we would for the death of a beloved family member, who left this earth too young, too full of life. Weep for the loving family and friends he left behind.

I am always surprised that I have any tears left on Memorial Day here in Israel, following as it does so closely on the heels of Holocaust Remembrance Day. And that my tears flow looser, hotter and with more despair, and my heart aches in the way it does. I figured out why, though, through the years, thereby learning the true secret of the State of Israel. Come closer, bend your ear, sssssh. Here it is: The State of Israel has no army.

No, my friend. No army at all. All it has is my husband and son, and your brother, and his son, and their sister's boy or girl and the neighbour's kid, and the electrician's daughter, and the survivor's grandson - the tall handsome one, who looks like the great-uncle who died in

Auschwitz. They all live in the next room, or the next house, or at the very most, an hour's bus ride away from the central bus station..

There is not a man, woman or child in Israel who has more than one or two degrees of separation between themselves and every, single, solitary, precious boy or girl in uniform who falls defending our lives from real bombs, real bullets, real slaughter.

The Jewish people have a blessing to bring to the world, especially to our Semitic cousins. If only they would stop shouting and crying and threatening long enough to listen, how different their lives would be! And we would give it to them freely, generously, this, our hard-earned knowledge, the knowledge of the Jews. And it is simply this: that death has no glory. And that a life can never be replaced. There is no honour, no joy, no holiness in bombs and guns and knives and mortars ... in wounded flesh, and blood soaked streets. In dead children, and broken-hearted mothers. And that peace is a value to be cherished above glorious victories.

If only the BBC, and CNN, and SKY news would stop interviewing the mothers and uncles of suicide bombers, who speak of holy martyrdom, and sacred deaths, and holy wars; if only their confused reporters would simply sit and listen to Israel's keening on its Memorial Day, and broadcast that to the world instead, what blessing they would bring mankind. What a lesson. And I could cross one more thing off my "to do" list.

2. Why (Israeli-Palestinian) negotiations collapsed

Effective foreign policy requires a balance between the predictable and the unpredictable. Alliances require careful maintenance and no surprises while adversarial relationships sometimes require unpredictable responses. It is the unique gift of the Obama administration to have reversed this equation.

The collapse of peace negotiations was wholly predictable and has finally taken place. Efforts are now being made to assign blame and exert pressure on the parties. In a series of off the record interviews with Israeli newspapers, unnamed American officials involved in the negotiations have quite predictably put most of the blame on Israel. Careful reading, however, reveals more about America than it does Israelis or Palestinians.

In a wide-ranging interview with veteran Israeli journalist Nahum Barnea, blame was systematically assigned to Netanyahu and his government and a single, overarching cause: "people in Israel shouldn't ignore the bitter truth – the primary sabotage came from the settlements."

"Settlements" are indeed a primary issue, both for peace negotiations and for Israeli politics. But "settlements" have become a kind of *deus ex machina* for both domestic and international critics of Israel, the first and last explanation for why bad things happen.

One of the more remarkable statements from Barnea's interlocutor shows just how little understanding there is regarding "settlements" as an Israeli political issue. "We didn't realize continuing construction allowed ministers in his government to very effectively sabotage the success of the talks."

Since the 1980s there has been a predictable manner in which low and mid-level Israeli committees embarrass prime ministers engaged in peace negotiations with announcements

of construction tenders, some for projects far in the future. This is a major Israeli political problem, but reasonably informed American observers should at least be aware of it.

Amazingly, the Americans appear not to have been. Instead, they reacted with outrage, which is more foolish than simply being surprised and disappointed, since it rewards the Israeli right wing. It also betrays just how ill-informed American diplomats appear to be about the convoluted, if not demented, nature of Israeli politics and bureaucracy. Allowing Abbas to collapse the talks because of housing tenders issued for Gilo – a Jerusalem neighbourhood that no reasonable observer could possibly expect to be evacuated – is doubly so.

The outsized and deeply personal nature of the negotiations agenda in American foreign policy is reflected elsewhere. Moshe Ya'alon's overly blunt outburst against Kerry, in which he said the Secretary of State was only interested in winning a Nobel Peace Prize for brokering an Israeli-Palestinian agreement at a time when American allies were under threat around the world, is thus characterized as deeply hurtful; "the insult was great."

At the time American officials reacted with even more pique: ""We were shocked by Moshe Ya'alon's comments, which seriously call into question his commitment to Israel's relationship with the United States."

Ya'alon's remarks were accurate but ill-considered, and were in keeping with many being made by nervous American allies. But the American response then and now seems to be that Israelis should simply shut up.

Barnea reports that the US perceives the hero of the recent negotiations to be Tzipi Livni, who "fought for all her might to promote the agreement." This may be so, but characterizing Livni as the righteous woman of the hour simply amplifies the longstanding perception that she is the Obama administration's favoured successor to Netanyahu. This will not do her any good politically.

Despite it all, and to Kerry's credit, progress was made and an agreement was outlined. But one obstacle remained, Abbas' refusal to recognize Israel as a Jewish state. Here too the American official betrays something bordering on criminal ignorance:

"We couldn't understand why it bothered him [Abbas] so much. For us, the Americans, the Jewish identity of Israel is obvious. We wanted to believe that for the Palestinians this was a tactical move – they wanted to get something (in return) and that's why they were saying 'no.'

Recognizing Israel as a Jewish state is, for Abbas and the Palestinian leadership, if not the majority of Palestinians, a declaration that Jews have historic rights as a nation and a people, not simply a religion. Such a declaration would end the conflict once and for all by mandating that a Jewish nation-state may stand alongside a Palestinian state. And for those reasons it was out of the question.

The American habit of seeing Israel as a Jewish state is comforting, but the inability to understand that Palestinians refuse to do so out of religious convictions that Jews are a religion, not a people entitled to sovereignty in their historic homeland, is absurd. If the Arab-Israeli conflict has a "root cause," this is it. But American blindness is not surprising, since the religious context of international affairs has never been well-understood by American policymakers, and has, since 9/11, been deliberately obfuscated, denied, and pushed far to the background.

Finally, Barnea's interview betrays the understated American strategy of pressuring Israel with threats of international boycotts. This approach goes back at least a year, with statements by Kerry and enshrined as policy in President Obama's notorious interview with Jeffrey Goldberg prior to the AIPAC meeting in March 2014.

Barnea's interviewee made the threats clear: "The international community, especially the European Union, avoided any action during the negotiations. Now, a race will begin to fill the void. Israel might be facing quite a problem."

As with Kerry's and Obama's statements in the past, European states and corporations have been given explicit licence to explore boycotting Israel. European foreign ministries and the European Commission, pressured by anti-Israel NGO's that they themselves fund, will rush to the task.

Rarely has a bludgeon been wielded so blatantly by American administration against an ally. Kerry's haphazard use of the term "apartheid" makes the message unmistakable.

Historical outcomes are never inevitable but they are frequently predictable. So it was in the case of Kerry's latest efforts, where the pitfalls were obvious and self-made. As more details emerge there will be much blame to be shared by Israelis and Palestinians. America, however, will take the lion's share.

3. The tragic history of the two-state solution

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry recently ignited a diplomatic conflagration after he suggested that Israel might one day find itself to be an apartheid state.

It was my belief before this unfortunate comment that Kerry was a friend of Israel, and it remains my belief that he is a friend of Israel. This belief is not shared by people to my right. Based on my incoming e-mail, there are some who believe that Kerry is a latent -- or active - - anti-Semite. More reasonable people have suggested that Kerry has at least given Israelis, and friends of Israel, cause to doubt the sincerity of his publicly expressed pro-Israel sympathies. "I really don't think friends of Israel should use the A word," one friend of mine wrote by e-mail.

Do not fear: Kerry will not use the "A word" again, unless, of course, Israel gives him a particularly good reason to do so. A broader question remains, however. As another friend asked, "How should a liberal friend of Israel think about this current impasse, when it seems that the government in Jerusalem isn't interested in pursuing a two-state solution?"

It is difficult to blame Kerry for expressing frustration with the Israelis (or with the Palestinians) over the current standoff. I endorse his belief that the status quo is unsustainable for Israel and a continued disaster for Palestinians. But over time I've noticed that Kerry and President Barack Obama often neglect to mention a true, and relevant, fact about the pursuit of peace in the Middle East: The Israelis pursued a two-state solution even before there was an Israel. The Palestinians, and their Arab advocates, have rejected each previous attempt to bring about such a solution. This does not absolve Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government of its responsibility to stop settling its citizens on the West Bank. But it does suggest something about ultimate culpability.

In the U.S., as the former Pakistani diplomat Husain Haqqani has noted, the expression "that's history" means "that's irrelevant." But there is history here, and it should be

recognized, not only because it informs current reality, but also because it dispels the idea that Israel has forever stood in the way of Palestinian independence.

The first time the two-state solution was proposed was in 1937. The British Peel Commission, appointed to study the root causes of Arab riots in Palestine that began the year before, recommended partitioning Palestine into two main parts -- a very large Arab part and a much smaller Jewish part. The Jews squabbled, but ultimately came to the conclusion that the Peel recommendations be accepted as the basis for further negotiations. No matter: The Arab leadership in Palestine rejected the commission's findings out-of-hand.

Ten years later, the United Nations voted to partition Palestine into two states. In this proposal, the Arab state would have been slightly smaller than the Jewish state. The Jews accepted partition. The Arabs rejected it and launched a war against Israel upon its declaration of independence in 1948. The Arabs lost the war they initiated.

For the next 19 years, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank -- the territories that are today meant to comprise a Palestinian state -- were occupied by Egypt and Jordan. These two Arab states had the opportunity over almost two decades to establish an independent Palestinian state but didn't. In May and June of 1967, the Arab states threatened a war of annihilation against the Jewish state. Israel struck pre-emptively against Egypt and Syria. Jordan then attacked Israel from the West Bank. The Arabs lost this war as well, and the Israelis occupied both the West Bank and Gaza.

In the first days after the war, many Israelis were under the mistaken impression that the Arabs would sue for peace, gaining back the West Bank and Gaza in exchange for a cessation of hostilities. But the Arab League, meeting in Khartoum, Sudan, in late August 1967, declared that there would be no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel and no negotiations with Israel. A decade later, the Egyptian president, Anwar Sadat, initiated a separate peace with Israel and received for it the Sinai Peninsula, which Israel had also occupied in 1967.

In 1993, Israel decided to negotiate with the Palestine Liberation Organization. This peace track culminated in the 2000 Camp David negotiations, at which the Israeli prime minister, Ehud Barak, offered the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, all of Gaza and much of the West Bank. Arafat left Camp David without making a counteroffer. The Camp David offer (and later Barak offers) are shrouded in controversy, but U.S. President Bill Clinton, who presided over the talks, blamed Arafat for their collapse.

In 2005, Ariel Sharon, then the Israeli prime minister, unilaterally withdrew all Israeli soldiers and settlers from Gaza. This did not lead to bilateral negotiations, but instead to an outbreak of attacks from Gaza on Israel. Three years later, Sharon's successor, Ehud Olmert, proposed an Israeli withdrawal from 93% of the West Bank (and additional land swaps with the Palestinians). The Palestinians rejected this offer as well.

The Palestinians, and their appointed (or un-appointed) Arab representatives, have passed up numerous opportunities over an almost 80-year period to divide Palestine among its two native peoples, Arabs and Jews. The Israelis have done stupid and short-sighted things over the decades, but they have repeatedly sought territorial accommodation as well. It would be useful for American diplomats, and others, to acknowledge this history when they speak about current Israeli recalcitrance. It would also be smart to take into account this history when offering predictions about the future of the two-state solution.

4. The heavens shine on Israel

In recent months, the imperious American Secretary of State and others have warned Israel that unless it rapidly proceeds to establish a full-fledged Palestinian state in Judea and Samaria, the sky will come crashing down on the Jewish state. The doomsday diviners are certain that unless the "two-state solution" is promptly implemented, Israel will molder, or atrophy into apartheid and inch into isolation.

Well, guess what: They're wrong. The wisdom and utility of a two-state settlement aside, its absence is not a catastrophe for Israel. In fact, Israel will continue to prosper and achieve, despite long-term lingering conflict with the Palestinians and notwithstanding the apocalyptic agonizing of well-meaning friends like John Kerry.

As Israel approaches its 66th Independence Day next week, it is important to emphasize and re-emphasize this; to shake off the bleak and sinister prognostications of our 'friends' and enemies. The gloomy, wintry forecasts are just not accurate.

In fact, a cold evaluation of Israel's strengths versus our enemies' threats leads to the conclusion that Israel is winning on all battlefronts; overcoming every challenge; and advancing in all ways.

Major military threats to Israel have greatly diminished, as Arab societies and armies crumble across the Middle East. Soft power attacks on Israel -- things like international campaigns to divest from Israel and to sanction Israel -- have mostly fallen flat. The Chinese, the Indians, and even the Europeans are lining up to buy Israeli technologies, not to boycott them.

Palestinian attempts to prosecute or confront Israel are a nuisance and ongoing, but they are mostly empty threats, as the Palestinians are in disarray and deeply divided (despite the flimsy, fake, rehashed Fatah-Hamas unity accord). The amorphous situation in the West Bank is messy but manageable, and is far less bad than most alternatives.

The dramatic weakening of America and the U.S.-Israel relationship under President Barack Obama is of grave concern, but this is temporary and reversible. And for Israel's major challenge -- the peril of an Iranian nuclear bomb -- that too will yet be dealt with, I believe, quite firmly.

In the meantime, Israel's dramatic drive to succeed ever-more in all aspects of life continues unabated, with spectacular results: outstanding science and top-notch technology; leading brain scientists and missile defense systems; Nobel Prize winners; first-class doctors and world-class health care; high levels of Torah study -- only 70 years after the destruction of European Jewry's Torah world; a robust economy and strong currency; massive foreign investment; innovative water desalinization programs and newly discovered, massive natural gas resources; a super-vibrant social assistance sector; multiple humanitarian missions undertaken abroad; and most of all, sensational activism and high motivation of our magnificent youth.

So my net assessment of Israel's strategic and internal situation is astonishingly optimistic. In overall perspective, Israel is stronger than any of its enemies. Neither the perpetual Palestinian conundrum, nor the acute Iranian threat to Israel, nor the unstable regional situation -- make me a pessimist. Nor do Kerry's miserable prophecies.

If anything worries me, it's our domestic disputes, social ills and spiritual deficiencies. Plus the hard-left negativism of mainstream media. But these are our challenges to overcome.

Their resolution depends on our energies and wisdom, not on force majeure or the foibles and dictates of others.

And note: Israelis are neither crushed nor dispirited by their challenges. They remain quite resilient and energized to build an even better future.

Listen to the words of the late, great Rabbi Dr. Ambassador Yaacov Herzog, speaking in 1971 about "The Permanence of Israel":

"We face perils. No man can guarantee that fighting will not resume tomorrow, that our soldiers will not have to fight again bloody battles. But we know we have the strength to withstand them. The balance of arms is in our favor at the moment. ... We may face political isolation and pressures, but we face all this in the knowledge that we belong to a new epoch and that the Jew has changed -- in Jerusalem, in Israel and across the world. And though at times it looks dark, the light will reappear. With firmness touched with generosity, with strength uplifted by spiritual understanding, we can move ahead. With all the difficulties, with all the pressures, we are the generation of redemption. Let us indeed be worthy of this privilege that defies human logic and supersedes human vistas."

So on this Independence Day, count your personal and our national blessings. Life in Israel is full of meaning and delight -- adorned by sacrifice, commitment, achievement and joy -- all the components that make life satisfying and exciting, and certainly so for a Jew.

Despite the overwrought friends, and the naysayers, boycotters and detractors -- the heavens are shining, not collapsing, upon Israel.

5. Note to the USA: We're not children

The April 29 deadline set by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry for securing peace and a Palestinian state has passed. And so, after all the back and forth of threats and demands, and the Fatah-Hamas unity deal announced last week, what have we been left with? A couple stuck in a toxic -- but for a number of years not an extremely bloody and violent -- relationship; a surprisingly enthusiastic counsellor who has insisted, against the protests of the couple, on dragging them into counselling; signs of the violence to come as tensions start to rise again between the couple; and a breakdown of the counselling accompanied by a rebuke by the counsellor, who laments that he can't want to fix the relationship more than the couple itself.

This is the story of the most recent round of failed Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. But while this latest push is interesting to dissect and discuss, it is secondary to the real issue, and the effort spent in the inevitable blame game following the breakdown of talks will prove pointless and futile. The fact is that the sides are miles apart. That is simply the way things are -- and the two sides in this tug of war realize that better than anyone else.

The dispute between the Arabs and the Jews, between the Palestinians and the Israelis, and the story of the return of the Jewish people to their homeland, is unique and unparalleled in human history. The fact that the two sides are finding it difficult to reach a compromise and make the necessary "tough decisions," to quote the U.S. president, should therefore come as no surprise.

Kerry, who took it upon himself to try to revive the talks, had initially set ambitious goals for the discussions, expecting no less than a full and final peace agreement between the sides

by late this month. But while this quintessentially American spirit of "trying and failing is better than not trying at all" has helped make America great, in the Middle East – especially when it comes to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict – trying and failing is often far worse than not trying at all.

After all, trying and failing has historically sparked greater violence and deeper despair – just look at the intifada that followed President Clinton's failed peace efforts. In contrast, the years of stalemate that have characterized the Israeli and Palestinian situation prior to the forced renewal of talks under the stewardship of Kerry were some of the least violent and least bloody in decades of conflict, especially considering the mayhem the Middle East has been convulsed by in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring.

Granted, simply not killing each other is not the stuff that Nobel Peace Prizes are made of. But it is far better than being killed while negotiations are taking place. And, since the sides have been forced into negotiations, violence has escalated – just last week, Gaza-based militants fired half a dozen rockets into Israel on the last day of Passover.

Now, with Kerry's deadline having come and gone, the two sides have been rebuked by a visibly exhausted secretary of state. President Obama, meanwhile, noted that the sides have not demonstrated the political will to make "tough decisions." Yet although these words might be true, as they say in the recently celebrated Passover Seder, *Ma Nishtana?* What has changed?

True, the two sides were not happy with the stalemate. Quite the contrary. But for both sides, it was better than the realistic alternatives – and certainly better than the bloody violence that both sides have been trying to avoid, violence that could be triggered again by risky compromises that have the potential to tear both societies apart.

At the end of the day, Israelis and Palestinians are not children – they are political players quite capable of making their own calculations and choosing alternatives that are the least bad from their own perspective. They might not always be the alternatives that outside observers think they should choose, but both sides should, as other peoples around the world are, be free to judge what is in their own interests. Both Israelis and Palestinians are also very much aware of the decisions they need to make if they are to come to a full and complete peace agreement, one that recognizes the right of both peoples to the land. If they don't make those decisions, it's not because they don't know what they are.

One day, when the geopolitical and political stars are aligned, peace will be possible. But until that moment comes, no amount of external prodding is going to make the two sides take decisions that they just aren't ready to make.

6. Palestinian Unity: An awkward product of Israel's indifference

On April 23 Fatah and Hamas, usually at daggers drawn in their competition for legitimacy among the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza, announced an agreement that a unity government be formed within five weeks and that general elections be held within six months.

Such attempts have been tried in the past, invariably leading to collapse. Aside from their internal struggle for power, the parties are still seriously split along ideological grounds: Fatah pragmatists and Hamas ideologues; one seeking accommodation with Israel, the other, in principle if not always in practice, rejecting the existence of the Jewish state.

For both groups, the current reconciliation effort is tactical not strategic. At best a unity government will face still more thorny economic, social, administrative and security challenges. These will be permeated by a profound lack of trust.

Why would Fatah, engaged in negotiations and practical co-operation with Israel (a prime example being their extensive security ties) decide to risk its broad international credibility with such a dubious proposition?

Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian Authority president, who dominates Fatah, seems to have opted for strengthening his and Fatah's nationalist credentials among Palestinians, thus minimizing the risk that he will be seen still more widely as an Israeli dupe. The Fatah leadership holds no hope that there can be progress through negotiations. Mr. Abbas is concerned that he will increasingly be faced with a series of Israeli *fait accompli* in which he will have little choice but to acquiesce. According to Stratfor Global Intelligence, for instance, citing Israeli sources, during the nine months during which Secretary of State John Kerry's negotiations took place, the Israeli government approved plans for some 14,000 housing units.

He may hope that Hamas will be drawn into the mainstream, building on that group's assertions, albeit highly qualified, that it accepts Israel within the 1967 lines. Hamas also sees the waning of its own popularity within Gaza, given its longstanding inability to meet the material needs of Gaza's citizens, upon which its legitimacy largely depends.

Gaza faces growing Egyptian hostility, that country being its only outlet to the outside world other than through the heavy hand of Israel. Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas Prime Minister, needs to strengthen his organization's identity as a constructive player and its voice in decision-making. By this he hopes to reverse Hamas' tumbling credibility at home and abroad, particularly among the Arab oil states on which Gaza is mightily dependent financially.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu looks like a winner in all of this. Henceforward he will more easily be able to justify his tough line on security, settlements and the whole rubric of Palestinian-related issues. His government has moved quickly, in the wake of the Palestinian announcement, to withdraw from what was left of the Kerry process, thereby easing the Prime Minister's efforts to satisfy his ideological right. He will not have to deal with difficult and hitherto immediate issues such as the release of Palestinian prisoners, settlement freezes or establishing borders for a Palestinian state.

President Abbas' expectation seems to be that he can effect unity, via a government of technocrats, avoiding the risk that Israel will financially or otherwise embargo the Palestinian territories. Such a move would create havoc. Israel itself would have to manage these territories. Indeed, there has been considerable debate recently on whether the Palestinian authority might implode of its own accord.

Mr. Abbas is almost certainly calculating that the United States and other Western donors will accept the new reality and resign themselves to dealing with the unity proposition rather than penalize and weaken him, he being the best bet among few alternatives.

American language on the issue falls short of rejectionism, characterizing this new reality, from the start, as simply "disappointing," but quickly evolving into more positive language. White House senior advisor Philip Gordon, when addressing the Council of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, declared that as long as any new Palestinian government asserts its rejection of terror, its recognition of Israel and its acceptance of past agreements, U.S. aid to the Palestinian Authority will continue. Most importantly he added that the unity

proposition was not necessarily a bad thing because it would broaden the Palestinian net in any future dialogue.

The Europeans may grumble that they will be called on yet again to subsidize a Palestinian welfare state, but they are most unlikely to back off given the consequences. And then there are always the Arab oil states, which can step in. But whether the Arab option could be sustainable in the long run is open to question, given the Gulf states' preoccupation with the region's other crises.

My best bet is that the challenges confronting a unity government, lack of any real trust and the ongoing internecine competition for power will torpedo these efforts. We and the antagonists will be stuck with the no war/no peace reality that has perpetually dogged relations between Israelis and Palestinians and from which there seems no way out.

7. Moving beyond the doomed 'peace process'

President Obama's deadline for Israelis and Palestinians to seal a peace deal has passed with the two sides as far as apart as ever. This is a chance to revisit the decades-long exercise of the "peace process."

The first reason for the failure is the refusal to acknowledge that the status quo is the product of a series of wars between Israel and its Arab neighbours. None of those wars were between Israel and Palestine, since there was no Palestinian entity. Palestinians represented what is euphemistically called "collateral damage" in the conflict.

In 1948, there was no Palestine problem; there was an Israel problem, in that the Arab League wouldn't tolerate a Jewish state in its midst. It wasn't until the 1980s that the Arab League started calling for the creation of a Palestinian state, implicitly adopting the two-state formula it had rejected for decades.

War happens when one or more entities opts to forcibly change a status quo.

This is what happened in 1948: The Arab League regarded the status quo shaped by the United Nations around two states (one Jewish, one Arab) as intolerable, and tried to force change. It failed to achieve its goal, the destruction of Israel. But the new status quo that emerged didn't meet Israel's security requirements either, and so was fundamentally unstable.

The 1965 war also had nothing to do with Palestine. Then, Israel joined Britain and France in a bid to topple Gamal Abdul-Nasser's regime in Cairo and prevent Egypt's seizure of the Suez Canal. Had the scheme succeeded, Israel might've felt more secure on its southern fringes in the context of a new status quo.

Nor was the 1967 war about Palestine. Nasser, who started it, said the objective was "throwing the Jews into the sea." At no point was creating a Palestinian state even considered. Nasser failed, and the new status quo favoured Israel by widening its security perimeter — with territories taken from Egypt, Jordan and Syria, not from Palestine.

Nor was the 1973 war about Palestine. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's aim was to regain control of the Sinai and reopen the Suez Canal. The new status quo that emerged was acceptable to both sides: Israel obtained a peace treaty and formal recognition from Egypt,

plus the demilitarization of the Sinai. Egypt could reopen the canal and divert resources to economic development.

Syria and Jordan, junior partners in the 1967 and 1973 wars, ended up losers. Yet Israel returned the territory it had seized from Jordan in exchange for a peace treaty, full recognition and security arrangements. In the 1990s, Israel came close to a similar deal with Syria, only to see the scheme collapse thanks to President Hafez al-Assad's fears for the safety of his regime.

Israel's other war, against Lebanon in 1982, also ended with the occupation of a chunk of territory. Again, once it had achieved its objectives, Israel was prepared to return the seized land.

The so-called peace process doesn't bring together the actual parties to the wars but seeks a deal between one party that fought and another that wasn't involved.

The demand for a return to pre-1967 borders is bizarre, to say the least. In 1967, there were no borders, just ceasefire lines drawn in 1948 — lines that symbolized an unstable status quo that led to two wars. Going back to them means returning to a situation that breeds war, not peace.

The "peace process" ignores a fact well established in human history: Every war ends with a winner and a loser; the winner dictates the new status quo and the loser grudgingly accepts.

Israel is perhaps the only winner to be prevented from even thinking about cashing its chips. Each time it won a war, the United Nations and other outsiders intervened to put the whole thing on a different trajectory.

The only way out of the impasse is for Israel to do what winners do: Shape the status quo that suits it.

Those promoting the two-state formula should ask a simple question: Which of the two states is easier to define? The obvious answer is Israel. So why not start with asking Israel to draw the borders it feels secure in? That would define the space in which the second state, for Palestinians, could be imagined and created.

In shaping the new status quo, Israel must show maximum magnanimity. Even then, Palestinians might find the outcome imposed by the winner intolerable, as have losers in countless past wars.

If both Israelis and Palestinians lower their expectations, they could develop a formula for coexistence. All the various "peace initiatives" have done is to raise Palestinian expectations beyond what any Israeli government could accept while raising Israeli fears to higher levels.

The alternative is to live with the current "limbo," an interim status quo that appears surprisingly stable: The level of violence is at its lowest in four decades, while people in Gaza and the West Bank are doing economically better than their brethren in many Arab countries.

8. Israel, Kerry is one of your best friends

Israel is safe once more from the threat of "apartheid" -- the word, that is. US Secretary of State John Kerry has clarified comments made in a closed-door meeting last week, and he stated clearly that Israel is not an apartheid state.

But Kerry's dire warning, and the future the secretary was predicting for Israel, lingers. That point seems lost amid this week's onslaught against Kerry, as members of Congress and Israel advocates raced to prove their pro-Israel credentials with their outrage.

The histrionics over the secretary's remarks are yet one more sign of how fundamentally broken American politics are when it comes to Israel. Vast energy is poured into defending Israel from an inappropriate word. Yet nowhere near enough energy is devoted to promoting policies that will actually protect and save Israel's Jewish democracy in the long run.

Labels aside, Israel is maintaining the longest military occupation in the world. In the territory occupied in 1967, Jewish residents enjoy all of the benefits of Israeli democracy, while Palestinian residents in the same territory lack basic rights of citizenship.

Many predict the number of non-Jews in the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River soon will be greater than the number of Jews, and everyone from President Barack Obama to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has come to understand what this means.

Without a two-state solution to this conflict, Israel draws ever closer to an unfathomable choice: Forsake its democracy by establishing rule of a Jewish minority over a non-Jewish majority, or forsake its Jewish character by granting equal rights to all residents under its control.

That's the future that former Israeli prime ministers Ehud Barak Olmert and Ehud Barack warned about when they invoked the spectre of apartheid; and it's that future that Kerry has been working tirelessly to avert with his Israeli-Palestinian peace initiative. It's a choice that draws sadly closer, now that Kerry's efforts have passed their initial nine-month deadline, and the parties have resumed the familiar cycle of provocation and retaliation.

To question Kerry's commitment to Israel over a word, after everything that he's done to help Israel, is absurd. No U.S. leader has done more to help Israel gain acceptance in the international community and ensure its long-term peace and security.

What friends of Israel should really be asking themselves is not whether they are doing everything they can to protect Israel from being called certain names, but whether they are doing everything possible to secure its future as the democratic home of the Jewish people by bringing about a two-state peace.

Sadly, this question is conspicuously absent from our politics.

Many politicians' reflexive defence posture at times like this allows our friends and family in Israel to continue believing that the root of their problems is anti-Israel bias rather than the expansionist policies a right-wing minority is foisting on their country. They need to hear that the policies of that minority are out of sync with the values and the interests of the United States, and that staying the present course risks the foundations of the relationship between the two countries.

Shooting the messenger does Israel no favours.

Friends of Israel should start by thanking Kerry for his commitment to Israel and supporting him as he seeks to break the present impasse in negotiations.

And if we can channel as much passion and energy into ending the conflict as we do into protecting Israel from painful words, Israel may yet stand a chance.

9. Palestinian-Israeli talks: time for a “time-out”

In basketball, when a team scores a number of baskets in a row, the opposing team’s coach usually calls for a “time out.” Its purpose is not only to give new instructions to the team, but more importantly, to stop the psychological slide that may be causing the collapse of the team’s defence and the impotence of its offense.

Therefore, it was hardly surprising that, as an avid basketball player, U.S. President Barack Obama reacted last Friday to the news about the reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas by suggesting a “time out” in the currently morbid Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. Implicitly, when suggesting the pause, Obama also acknowledged that the talks had reached a dead end even before the latest crisis, noting that the two sides’ leaders failed to make the difficult decisions that a breakthrough required.

Secretary of State John Kerry should heed the president’s advice. Moreover, he should use the suggested pause to take his negotiations team, headed by Special Envoy Martin Indyk, to a weekend retreat. There, they should review the process as it has unfolded since this phase of the talks began in July 2013. They should ascertain the strategic - not operational or tactical - mistakes made during the period. They should also determine what a “recalibrated” process should look like and assess whether they can do what it takes to achieve better results.

What are the key mistakes that should be discussed at the retreat? First, Kerry should not have permitted Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to engage him in endless discussions regarding the conditions for negotiations. Kerry *should* have told the two leaders:

Gentlemen, if you want peace, the United States is prepared to facilitate. If you reach an agreement, issues like a settlement-construction freeze and release of prisoners will be taken care of. Prisoners will be released and construction will cease in whatever settlements will find themselves located on the Palestinian side of the negotiated boundary. But the world presents the United States with too many important challenges for us to be engaged in negotiating precursors to negotiations. So make up your mind: If you want peace, we need to focus on border demarcation, security, Jerusalem, refugees, and water resources. Not on your conditions for negotiating these issues.

Second, Secretary Kerry should not have retreated from the original goal of negotiating a comprehensive deal to gaining acceptance of a Framework Agreement. The reason this was a mistake is that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict violates the golden rule that “the devil is in the details.” In this conflict, the devil is in the principles that form the essence of any Framework Agreement.

The problem is less about the demarcation of a boundary that makes sense demographically - it is about accepting the principle that it would be based on the 1967 lines. The problem is less about dividing control and responsibilities in Jerusalem - it is about defining who will be sovereign in the Holy Basin. It is less about finding a practical solution to the plight of

Palestinian refugees - it is about accepting the refugees' Right of Return. It is less about gaining Palestinian acceptance of a legal stipulation that the agreement would "end all claims" and that following its signing there would be "no further recourse" - it is about gaining their formal recognition of Israel "as the national homeland of the Jewish people."

While professionals on both sides can reconcile competing interests on the practical dimensions of the conflict, a Framework Agreement involves principles and competing national narratives that only the leaders can negotiate. Not surprisingly, Kerry has spent many visits and countless hours discussing these principles with Abbas and Netanyahu. This violated Henry Kissinger's stipulation that leaders should not assume the role of negotiators. It also ignored the experience of South Africa, where the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to reconcile competing narratives took place only after the political resolution of the dispute.

Third, Kerry should have begun by focusing on the most important set of negotiations—that between himself and President Obama. This is because Palestinian-Israeli negotiations were never going to succeed without the United States exercising some leverage over the negotiating parties. But given the political capital that needs to be spent exercising such leverage, it is only the President of the United States who could decide that such leverage be employed. As these negotiations between the secretary and the president were never settled in a way that gained clarity in the minds of Palestinian and Israeli leaders, it is hardly surprising that both kept wondering what the president's oft stated backing of his Secretary of State actually meant.

Finally, Kerry allowed a devaluation of America's standing by violating Jim Baker's number one rule for successful negotiations: The willingness to walk away from the table. By refraining from using leverage and by agreeing to engage the parties in endless discussions over conditions for negotiations - and even more bizarrely, by allowing Jonathan Pollard's possible release to be brought into the equation - the secretary gave the parties the impression that he is more interested in an agreement than they are. Thus, instead of the parties pleading for U.S. facilitation, it appeared as if Kerry was chasing Netanyahu and Abbas.

Recalibrating U.S. conduct in the peace process mid-way through the Obama administration's second term will not be easy, because most of the recommendations suggested here will require Israeli and Palestinian leaders to unlearn what they have become accustomed to expect from Secretary Kerry and his team. Indeed, given the importance that the exercise of leverage will assume in any successful recalibration of America's approach, none of this will succeed without President Obama deciding that this is *really* a top priority. Yet without such recalibration, Israeli-Palestinian negotiations will remain in the Intensive Care Unit where the talks are currently hospitalized. That everyone concerned has been reluctant to "pull the plug" over these talks is of little consolation for those who truly care about Arab-Israeli peace.
