

January 31, 2009

Dear Friends

This is probably one of the most difficult periods in my political life as a Jew living in the State of Israel. The events of the war in Gaza hit hard my foundations of hope that a peaceful conflict resolution between Israelis and Palestinians can be achieved in the near future. Moreover, my trust in humanity has been weakened seeing the ease with which human beings rally for a war, exercise blind patriotism, express desire for vengeance, delegitimize the opponent, and develop insensitivity to human life, denial of responsibility, self-righteousness and moral entitlement. This is in contrast to the great difficulty that human beings have in mobilization for peace. We see over and over again that it takes many years and many efforts to persuade people in the importance of peace, but it takes an extremely short time to convince people in the need of war. It is even more difficult to establish moral considerations.

I have been agonizing for weeks whether to write an open letter. I could not bring myself to the paper and pencil or to the keyboard, feeling despair and helplessness. But only a responsibility to voice another opinion as an alternative to the officially presented views that are supported by the great majority of the Israeli Jews brought me to write this letter. It is important that you will know that there is a minority of us, Jews in Israel, who care about moral considerations and opposed this war.

What can I say when I know that about 1300 Palestinians killed, at least half of them innocent civilians, including children, women, and old people, over 4000 were injured, thousands of homes were destroyed and dozens of thousands became homeless. Also on the Israeli side 13 Israelis were killed, including 3 civilians, hundreds were wounded, and thousands had to escape from the hundreds of rockets that were fired on Israel. I could repeat the arguments of the Israeli government that through the years many hundreds of rockets were fired on the Israeli land west of Gaza, including populated settlements; that no government would allow that their citizens will be hurt; that "after eight years of restraint, Israel has decided to act against the terror attacks coming from the Gaza Strip. Israeli restraint was misinterpreted as weakness by Hamas and members of the vertical axis of extremism led by Iran";...that "Israel had given a mutual agreement to preserve peace its final chance when it agreed to the Egyptian brokered Period of Calm

agreement in June 2008, whose terms were repeatedly transgressed by Hamas". It is just natural that those who sent the soldiers to the war have to defend it and rationalize it. This is a human principle.

But these arguments do not tell the whole story. Even if we take the Israeli arguments without the background and complexity, they cannot account for the scope of civilian losses and the destruction on the Palestinian side. The brutality and scope of the Israeli actions testify to deeper roots that are founded in the darker side of human beings. They express the wish to erase the feeling of failure in the Second Lebanese War during the summer of 2006; they reflect a deep sense of collective victimhood because of the continuous firing of rockets on civilian settlements in the south by the Hamas military organ-- this sense of victimhood led to the urge to revenge in order to punish for the harm done and prevent further firing. In addition, they are derived from the continuous dehumanization of the Hamas organization. Finally, they are based on the conviction that Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip in 2005, allowing Palestinians to live their lives and they instead engage in terror.

But, the reality is much more complex than the narrative perpetuated by the Israeli political and military establishments, which successfully constructed the beliefs of the Jewish public in Israel. This is a kind of irony because one of the objectives of the war was to carve the consciousness of the Palestinians so they will recognize the harm that Hamas is causing to the Palestinian cause and Palestinian life. This objective was not achieved and instead the war strengthened the hatred and mistrust of both sides towards each other, reinforced the support of hawkish opinions on both sides, and as a result, the peaceful process is further greatly damaged. Moreover, it is hard to detect any meaningful political gains of Israel in the balance of this war. We are back to the same lines that were before the war ---with terrible losses and destruction.

The psychological analysis of the situation illustrates the selective, biasing and distorting transmission and dissemination of information by the Israeli channels of communication. It does not mean that the alternative information does not exist in Israel but very few are interested in knowing what is really happening. Thus, most of the Israeli Jews do not know what Israel perpetrated through the decades of occupying Gaza; most of the Israeli Jews do not know that originally Hamas was founded by the Israeli

authorities to provide an alternative to the national movement of PLO; most of the Israeli Jews do not know that Hamas is a religious–fundamental movement that also provides welfare, health and educational services to the Palestinian people; most of the Israeli Jews do not know that Hamas was elected democratically (with the insistence of USA) to lead the government of the Palestinian authority because of Fatah corruption, and mostly because of the fruitless negotiations with Israel which did not provide any political solution of the conflict; most of the Israeli Jews do not know that the policy of the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon about ‘No Palestinian Partner’ led to unilateral disengagement from Gaza without negotiation with the Palestinian Authority. This act was done in order to delegitimize Palestinian Authority and in attempt to keep control over the West Bank. Moreover, the disengagement did not free Gaza but turned it into one big prison. Israel controls the entrances to Gaza and controls every aspect of human life in Gaza. It decided to change the support of Gazans in Hamas by carrying out a siege that allowed minimal living and brought Gaza to economic disaster. Israeli Jews know that even after disengagement, Hamas continues to fire rockets on the Israeli civil settlements but few know that during 2005– 2008, hundreds of Palestinians were killed by the Israeli forces. Few know that the tunnels were built mainly to smuggle civil goods that could not be brought to Gaza and not only weapons as the great majority believe. Few know that there is a relationship between Israeli violence and Palestinian violence, preferring to see the latter as irrational, fanatic, and immoral while the former as defensive, moral and well justified.

Few of the Israeli Jews recognize that Israel during two years had at least two alternative strategies to prevent further escalation; either to talk with Hamas which is possible and negotiate long-term cease-fire, or take decisive actions of peace (for example, to ease conditions of life of the Palestinians by removing many of the checkpoints and to remove illegal settlements as required by the Israeli promise to U.S.) vis à vis President Abbas and the Palestinian Authority to show the Palestinians that process yields tangible fruits that lead to prosperity and security. Even when we shift to the period before the war, most of the Israeli Jews do not know that it was possible to negotiate continuation of the cease fire with Hamas and do not remember that it was Israel who broke the ceasefire of November 4, 2008, killing 6 Palestinians. Hamas is not

my cup of tea as it is a fundamentalist religious organization that practices also terrorism, but it is a social movement with wide support in the Palestinian society because it provides an alternative to humiliated Palestinian national identity. This movement is not homogenous and it is possible to hear in it different voices including ones that support negotiation with Israel and acceptance of the two state solution.

All these omissions are not surprising in view of the fact that the involved sides in conflict have been deeply embedded in the culture of conflict. They systematically try to construct the views of society members in a direction of presenting own society as being moral, just, peace loving, or moderate and the rival as being immoral, intransigent, violent, irrational, or extreme. In addition each side views itself as the victim of this conflict. This process goes on for decades. Only during few years during Rabin time it looked as the peace process is gaining momentum. But since the year 2000, when the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak decided on the policy of "no partner", the peace process is dying. It is true that Palestinians have their share in the failure of the Oslo process. But the tremendous asymmetry of power puts the responsibility for the continuation of the conflict mostly on the Israeli side. It is Israel that has almost all the cards to solve the conflict; it occupies the land, holds Eastern Jerusalem, controls the life of the Palestinians, controls the resources of the West Bank, expands constantly the Jewish settlements on the West Bank, exercises preventive and punishing violent acts according to own will and has (at least had until now) almost unconditional backing of the superpower.

The contours of the potential settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are more or less clear: If it will happen, it will be in accordance to Clinton proposal, Taba understandings, Geneva agreement, and Arab league proposal: Israel will have to return to 1967 borders with some swaps of land in order to hold the most populated clusters of Jewish settlements just beyond the green line of 1967, Jerusalem will be divided, most of the Jewish settlements inside the territories will be dismantled, and the refugees problem will have to be solved via common agreement with their compensation and settlement mostly in the future Palestinian state. The present Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert outlined openly these principles to the Israeli public but did not take any concrete steps to implement them. Israeli public, while recognizing the need in two state solution (because

of the demographic fear), objects to the outlined principles. The majority of the Israeli Jews object to divide Jerusalem, to withdraw to 1967 borders and to dismantle most of the Jewish settlements the West Bank. In fact I must admit that I do not see any Israeli government evacuating about 60,000 Jewish settlers from the West Bank. Israeli Jewish public after the destruction of the peace camp in 2000 is moving steadily towards hawkish-nationalistic views. The present war provided additional blow to the peace camp. It is almost certainly that the next Israeli government will be very hawkish after the February 10 elections.

The rest will be written in the history books. .... The war did not erupt spontaneously but was well prepared, including its scope, the type of weapons to be used, and so on. Also it was consciously decided to use a disproportional might in order to save lives of Israeli soldiers and to teach the Palestinians a lesson. The results of the war are tragic for both nations. It provided unequivocal evidence to each side that the other side is evil and immoral. Now few of us here and there can only evaluate the tragedy, explain the events and pray for a miracle from outside forces that will come and save us from the worst human instincts.

Sincerely Daniel Bar-Tal