

Middle East Notes
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
February 14, 2013



[Read previous weeks' Middle East Notes here.](#)

Please note: Opinions expressed in the following articles do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns.

This week's Middle East Notes examines changes in the U.S. and Israeli governments, the continuing debate about the possibility of a two state solution in the face of the ever-changing "facts on the ground" i.e. settlement growth and its support by the government of Israel. Another item this week is the media "invisibility" of Palestinian Christians, whose voices are not heard.

- The February 1 and February 8 issues of the Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) Bulletin features articles on the Israeli military use of force question, John Kerry's confirmation by the Senate, two films on the Occupation, Obama's upcoming visit to Israel and the West Bank, and other topics.
- Gilead Sher writes in the Israeli News that "Israel must separate from the Palestinians to preserve country's Jewish, democratic character."
- Michael Lerner in Tikkun magazine comments on MJ Goldberg's article "The One State Fantasy."
- Americans for Peace Now provides a book review of "Pathways to Peace: America and the Arab-Israeli Conflict."
- Israeli News reports that a UN panel concludes Israeli settlements are illegal, stating that settlements exist exclusively for Israeli Jews' benefit creating system of total segregation.
- Barak Ravid reports in Ha'aretz that the UN human rights report on Israel paves way for sanctions and further isolation.
- Chemi Shaley of Ha'aretz writes that President Obama's Israel visit may mark rebirth of "centrality" of the Palestinian conflict.
- Cecily Hilleary of the Voice of America asks whether the new U.S. Secretary of State can bring peace to Israel and the Palestinians after more than a dozen of his successors have worked to negotiate peace between the two sides and failed.
- Jeffrey Abood in the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs notes that Christians in the Holy Land are so significant that it has become an important part of Israeli strategy to ensure that their voices are not heard.
- Simon Kuper writes in the Financial Times that Israel is now perched between hope and fear, that Israel's appetite for using violence may just be diminishing, and if the current peace holds a while, trust with Palestinians might grow. Optimism about this region may not be completely crazy.
- The most recent Foundation for Middle East Bulletin makes available the January-February 2013 Report on Israeli Settlement in the Occupied Territories with special information of the expansion of the Ma'ale Adumin settlement.

1) Churches for Middle East Peace Bulletin, February 1, 2013

Israeli military use of force questioned after deaths: In the month of January, the Israeli military has acknowledged responsibility for the deaths of four unarmed Palestinians in the West Bank leading to increased scrutiny of the military's rules of engagement. Coinciding with these events is a report released by Israeli human rights group B'Tselem that investigates protestor deaths caused by the Israeli military's use of "non-lethal" crowd control weapons. ...

This recent spate of deaths is receiving international attention. At a UN Security Council briefing this week, the UN special coordinator for the Middle East peace process Robert Serry told the council, "Increased use of live fire by Israeli security forces has been reported in the West Bank and is of concern." According to The Washington Post, "the killings come during what [Israeli] military officials describe as an uptick in incidents of stone-throwing and hurling of Molotov cocktails in the West Bank."

B'Tselem's Sarit Michaeli says, "The common thread in these cases is the use of lethal force in a policing situation where lethal force is not permitted...The people who were killed were not posing a mortal threat to the security forces that justifies opening fire with live ammunition."

The B'Tselem report, authored by Michaeli, shows a larger pattern of misconduct on the part of the Israeli military when it comes to using live fire and other crowd control measures. It says: "Crowd control weapons are supposed to be non-lethal, their purpose being to enable authorities to enforce the law without endangering lives ... Since 2005, six Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank by rubber coated metal bullets, another two when hit by tear-gas canisters fired directly at them, and at least two other Palestinians have been killed with 0.22-caliber bullets, which are used to disperse demonstrations despite official orders to the contrary. In addition, dozens of Palestinians have been seriously injured by use of these weapons. Moreover, since 2005, security forces have killed at least 46 Palestinians in the West Bank by firing live ammunition at stone-throwers.

"The Israeli military's standing orders explicitly state that live ammunition may not be fired at stone-throwers. A person throwing stones may be detained under standard arrest procedure only if the assailant poses an immediate threat to the physical wellbeing of the soldier or of another person. Only under circumstances of real mortal danger may live ammunition be fired at the body of the assailant, in order to eliminate the danger."

In response to the report, the Israeli Defense Force released a statement that says, "When dealing with illegal and violent riots, the IDF is making every effort to minimize any harm to the protesters and its top operational goal is to contain the event sans any casualties... The report presents a biased narrative, relying primarily on incidents that are either old or still under investigation by the military police." ...

[***Read the entire Bulletin here.***](#)

2) Churches for Middle East Peace Bulletin, February 8, 2013

Obama to visit to Israel and the West Bank: [Recently] the White House confirmed that President Obama will travel to Israel and the West Bank in March. Obama last visited in July of 2008, but has not returned since he was elected president. According to Reuters, this trip will give Obama and Netanyahu “a chance to try to repair their notoriously fractious relationship.”

The Times of Israel reports that Obama will call for a peace summit between Israel and the Palestinian Authority while he is in Israel. Israel’s Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon said he was “certain” that efforts to arrange such a meeting were already under way.” However, White House Spokesman Jay Carney elucidates: “That is not the purpose of this visit.”

Netanyahu’s coalition drama continues: Last weekend, Israeli President Shimon Peres tasked Netanyahu with forming a new government. However, Yair Lapid, the unexpectedly popular candidate in recent elections, is growing more confident. Lapid Sunday on Israel’s Channel 2 said “I’m not sure I’ll be in [Netanyahu’s new] coalition.... In a year-and-a-half, I’ll replace him. That’s what my advisers think too.” Netanyahu responded, saying that Lapid is “drunk with power,” thus fueling rumors that perhaps Lapid and his 19 Knesset seats will not be a member of Netanyahu’s coalition.

Meanwhile, Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid have formed an opposition bloc to Netanyahu that would call for reforms that would change life for ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israeli society, chiefly by requiring them to serve in the army. The combined 31 seats of Yesh Atid and Habayit Hayehudi alone combined with the 31 seats that the Likud won would bring the necessary 61-seat total for Netanyahu to have the majority of the Knesset, if he chooses to include them. There is doubt among members of Habayit Hayehudi who are concerned that Netanyahu will exclude Bennett from his coalition as a gesture towards President Obama. Though this worry seems to be unfounded, Bennett’s staunch support of settlements and partial annexation would be a hindrance for Netanyahu in future peace negotiations.

The Obama visit could complicate matters. JJ Goldberg writes, “It’s hard to imagine Netanyahu greeting the president as the head of a governing coalition that includes the settlers as ranking partners. Bennett might conceivably swallow some sort of vague peace process to join the cabinet, but the rest of his party won’t. Netanyahu will have to reach to his left, to [Tzipi] Livni and [Shaul] Mofaz. But Netanyahu, needing to remain at the center of his own coalition, will need another partner on his right flank. This boosts the prospects of [ultra-Orthodox party] Shas, which has a right-wing voter base but moderate positions on peace issues.”

Textbook study has mixed results: On Monday, a team of researchers presented the results of a three-year study that tried to objectively look at bias in Israeli and Palestinian textbooks directed against “the other.” The results and the responses they engendered were mixed, leaving the State Department, the primary funder of the study, to dance around the results.

While the report found that each side teaches their children little about the other’s religion, culture or economy and most maps on both side ignore the other, the results were not all negative. For years, the debate over incitement in textbooks has fueled accusations that there is no desire for peace. ...

[Read the entire Bulletin here.](#)

3) The time has come for two states: “Israel must separate from the Palestinians to preserve country’s Jewish, democratic character. “

Gilead Sher, Ynetnews, January 31, 2013

In about a month and a half Israel’s 33rd government will be sworn in, and, regardless of the make-up of the next coalition, it must succeed in determining the country’s borders.

The campaigns have ended, so the truth can be said: The issue of Israel’s borders is the most important of all. Israel must separate itself from the Palestinians and determine borders that will secure a democratic, egalitarian, legitimate and just state that will maintain a Jewish majority for generations to come.

It does not matter if we are convinced of our right to control the territories. This is an existential matter, because in order to preserve the state that was established here before us we must first determine the geographic borders, and then address the rest of the pressing issues: Morality, equal share of the burden, basic rights, separation of religion and state and rule of law. We will not have welfare, education, equality or national resilience until we separate from the Palestinians.

Sixty-five years after its inception, Israel still does not have a constitution or recognized borders for all of its territory – both of which are crucial for securing its identity in the spirit of the Declaration of Independence. The demographic reality that is taking shape in the area west of the Jordan River jeopardizes our national identity and internal solidarity, which were strong during Israel’s early years.

Unilateral steps are fine: From a geopolitical perspective, the status quo is as dynamic as ever, and it is enough to mention the Iranian nuclear threat and the rise of political Islam alongside the extremism and collapse of regimes in the Arab world. If we continue to be dragged along the path of lack of initiative, the likelihood of ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the basis of two states for two peoples will be reduced even more. In the meantime, we will become more and more isolated in the world, until the international community, hypocritical and self-righteous as it may be, will eventually disassociate itself from us entirely.

The outline for a peace agreement has been known to us all for more than 12 years, since the days of Bill Clinton and his plan for two states for two peoples. The core issues of the conflict – Jerusalem, refugees, borders, security – will not dissipate on their own just because we are ignoring them and dragging our feet on the way to a solution. On the contrary, these problems will intensify and will become more difficult to resolve. Eleven years have passed since the Arab League presented its peace initiative, but to this day Israel’s governments have not found the time to discuss it. Now, in light of the developments in the Arab world, Israel should signal that it is willing to consider regional negotiations with the tumultuous and bleeding Arab world. ...

[Read the entire piece here.](#)

4) Commentary on MJ Goldberg's article: The one state fantasy

Michael Lerner, Tikkun, January 29, 2013

[The one state fantasy](#) is an article by MJ Rosenberg which appeared on his blog on January 28, 2013; please use the link to read it. Following is Michael Lerner's response to Rosenberg's piece.

... [T]here's a deeper reason why a "one state solution" cannot happen till the current generation of Israelis [has] passed from history: the way that most Jews have understood the Holocaust. The interpretation that nobody came to our (the Jewish people's) aid, that we were alone and abandoned to genocide, and hence should have learned that we can only rely on our own strength for survival, and hence that we should never allow ourselves again to become a minority in a non-Jewish state unless there also exists one state out of the roughly 200 countries of the world that has a Jewish majority and a task of saving Jews from annihilation. While this view obscures the way the U.S., the Soviet Union and others did in fact intervene eventually and did save many Jewish lives, its primary fault lies in thinking that Jewish survival can be assured by ourselves in military terms, thereby ignoring the way that Israel is necessarily tied to the fate of the world's economic, political and environmental developments, and to the good will of the majority of the people of the world (which the Occupation, more than anything else, threatens to destroy). And the grabbing on to the trajectory of power-over-others to insure security is not only a losing proposition militarily ... it is also a sure path to destroy the Jewishness of the Jewish people, leaving Jews with little reason to stay in Israel when they can have a more secure and financially successful and physically safe life in the Diaspora, e.g. in Los Angeles or Miami or San Francisco or even New York or Toronto.

Yet I disagree with Rosenberg on two points: 1. I believe that if the Palestinian people were now to switch their demand from two states to "one person, one vote" for everyone under the rule of the Israeli army, both in the West Bank and Gaza, the immediate impact would be tremendous global support for that demand, including in the U.S., and the frustration of that demand could lead to economic and military/diplomatic reversals that could lead to enough pressure inside Israel that it might then freak out Israelis enough to suddenly take a Two state solution seriously instead of its current refusal to do so. In short, a global movement for "one person one vote" for Israel and the Occupied Territories might be precisely the thing that would give Palestinians a two state alternative. 2. But even if the Palestinians are willing to adopt that strategy, the peace-oriented forces in the U.S. are only going to be successful if we are engaged right now in a larger campaign to delegitimize the notion that security for the U.S. (or Israel) can be achieved through a strategy of domination.

In my last chapters of *Embracing Israel/Palestine* I lay out the way that a Strategy of Generosity and its associated Global Marshall Plan are the only lasting way we can get to avoid future wars and to create the global climate within which a real settlement and reconciliation between the Israeli and Palestinian populations would be resolved. The reason it hasn't caught on is because it would take a movement in the U.S. going door to door and helping people rethink their assumption that power = safety and re-credit in people's mind a different view, that generosity = safety and that we need as citizens of the U.S. to change American foreign policy completely based on this new paradigm. Most people on the Left would rather denounce Israel than try to change the fundamental thinking in the U.S., particularly if that meant having to speak to one's neighbors and learning how to listen respectfully, acknowledge their fears sympathetically, and help them move beyond those fears to a new way of thinking about the world. Yet it is only this fundamental transformation of consciousness that will actually work. ...

**5) Book review: Pathways to Peace
Americans for Peace Now (APN), January 28, 2013**

This is the fourth in a series of reviews of new books on Middle Eastern affairs. APN asked Dr. Gail Weig to review Dan Kurtzer's new book about the U.S.'s role in advancing Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Pathways to Peace: America and the Arab-Israeli Conflict (Daniel C. Kurtzer, editor; New York: Palgrave, 2012) 231 pages. \$30.00

The timely essays in this book do not provide a “road-map” to end the present Israeli-Palestinian impasse. Rather, they offer sophisticated and subtle arguments and observations focused on U.S. policies in the region, and on the urgent need for America to enter forcefully into negotiations with both sides in the conflict. Whatever the sympathies or expertise of individual authors, the underlying message throughout is the urgent need to promote a two-state solution, in the interests of all parties concerned. Perhaps the most fruitful approach to reviewing Pathways to Peace is to consider several leitmotifs, including the increasingly narrowing window for negotiating a two-state solution; policy prescriptions for the U.S. role in the region; the appeal to U.S. and Israeli self-interest; and the enduring crucial role of conflicting Israeli and Palestinian historical narratives.

Each and every author who contributed to the book agrees that time for a negotiated two-state solution is running out. Former U.S. ambassador to Israel and Egypt and Princeton professor Daniel C. Kurtzer warns, “The idea of a two-state solution--the cornerstone of American policy in the region--is now on life support....” (194). Like the majority of his fellow authors--whether concerned with the credibility of American policy in the region, or with Israel’s survival as a democratic and Jewish state--Kurtzer presents both reasons for and possible solutions to the stalemate.

Frustration and anger among Palestinians over Israeli government support for settlement infrastructure looms largest among the causes cited for failed negotiations thus far. Former Palestinian minister and co-founder of the internet magazine bitterlemons.org , Ghassan Khatib, speaks for many when he warns that it is a recipe for disaster to leave Palestinians and their land to the mercy of the Israeli government, army, and settlers (81). He and others emphasize that without credible U.S. investment in the peace process, that is, without a realistic assessment of the causes of the impasse and an even-handed approach to all parties concerned, the two-state solution is doomed to be replaced by considerably less attractive alternatives, including one state for the two peoples, and/or international recognition of a Palestinian state by fiat.

Solutions offered for re-starting American investment in peace negotiations and for maximizing the options for success do not result in consensus on a strategy. Some analysts, notably former Mossad analyst and co-founder of the bitterlemon.net family of Internet publications Yossi Alpher, as well as security strategists Colonel (ret.) P.J. Dermer and Stephen White, advocate an incremental process that builds upon trust and cooperation. ...

[Read the entire review on the APN website.](#)

6) UN panel concludes Israeli settlements are illegal

Israel News, January 31, 2013

A UN fact-finding mission says the Israeli government's settlement policy has clearly violated the rights of Palestinians and breaches one of the Geneva Conventions.

The panel's report to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva – the UN's first report on the subject as a whole – says the settlements exist for the exclusive benefit of Israeli Jews, creating a system of total segregation.

The investigators called on Israel on Thursday to halt settlement expansion and withdraw all Jewish settlers from the West Bank.

"Israel must, in compliance with article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, cease all settlement activities without preconditions. It must immediately initiate a process of withdrawal of all settlers from the OPT (occupied Palestinian territories)," said a report by the inquiry led by French judge Christine Chanet.

The settlements contravene the 1949 Geneva Conventions forbidding the transfer of civilian populations into occupied territory, which could amount to war crimes that fall under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC), it said.

In December, the Palestinians accused Israel in a letter to the United Nations of planning to commit further "war crimes" by expanding Jewish settlements after the Palestinians won de facto UN recognition of statehood and warned that Jerusalem must be held accountable.

Israel has not cooperated with the probe set up by the Human Rights Council last March to examine the impact of settlements in the territory, including east Jerusalem. Israel says the forum has an inherent bias against it and defends its settlement policy by citing historical and Biblical links to the West Bank.

The independent UN investigators interviewed more than 50 people who came to Jordan in November to testify about confiscated land, damage to their livelihoods including olive trees, and violence by Jewish settlers, according to the report.

"The mission believes that the motivation behind this violence and the intimidation against the Palestinians as well as their properties is to drive the local populations away from their lands and allow the settlements to expand," it said.

"Creeping annexation": About 250 settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem have been established since 1967 and they hold an estimated 520,000 settlers, according to the UN report. The settlements impede Palestinian access to water resources and agricultural lands, it said.

The settlements were "leading to a creeping annexation that prevents the establishment of a contiguous and viable Palestinian state and undermines the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination," it said. ...

[Read the entire article on the Ynet website.](#)

7) UN human rights report on Israel paves way for sanctions, further isolation

Barak Ravid, Ha'aretz, February 1, 2013

While Israel's coalition talks are focusing on the state budget and drafting ultra-Orthodox men into the military, every future member of the next cabinet should be disturbed by the UN Human Rights Council's report.

If anyone needed a reminder of Israel's deteriorating standing on the international stage, they got one on Thursday in the report by the UN Human Rights Council's fact-finding mission on the settlements. While Israel's coalition talks are focusing on the state budget and drafting ultra-Orthodox men into the military, every future member of the next cabinet should be disturbed by the report.

All right, we know that the UNHCR, which commissioned the investigation, is a biased, anti-Israeli organization whose agenda is held hostage to a handful of countries that trample on the rights of women, gays and ethnic minorities every day. But that argument is convincing only to the already convinced. For most governments around the world, not to mention international public opinion and the business community, a UN report comes with an international seal of approval.

Next to the report by the International Fact-Finding Mission on Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, to give the UNHCR document its formal name, the Goldstone report on Israel's Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip in 2008-09 is child's play. Whereas the Goldstone report dealt with a single event, the report on the settlements addresses policies pursued by Israeli governments in the 45 years since the occupation of the West Bank in 1967.

While more than a few Western countries rejected the Goldstone report and showed understanding of Israel's position and recognition of the complexities of fighting terror in Gaza, not a single country supports construction in the Jewish settlements of the West Bank. Even Israel's greatest friends are fed up with the Netanyahu government's settlement construction policy, which they believe jeopardizes the realization of the two-state solution.

The implications of the mission's report are also much more serious than those of the Goldstone report. For the first time, a UN agency is calling on the world's governments to reconsider their relations with Israel and is recommending multinational corporations to withdraw their investments and sever all direct or indirect dealings with the settlements.

Sanctions like these were imposed on South Africa's apartheid regime and are imposed now on the Iranian regime, which refuses to suspend its nuclear program. Israel is not Iran, nor is it, at this stage, an apartheid state. Still, the report is a flashing light, warning of what could be waiting around the corner for Israel if it continues its current policy in the West Bank.

In addition to the tailwind for organizations promoting economic, academic and cultural boycotts of Israel, the report will further accelerate Israel's international isolation. After its expected adoption by the UNHCR plenum in Geneva in March, the report could make its way to the UN General Assembly or the Security Council in New York. In that event, it would go from a PR nuisance to a foreign-relations catastrophe.

[Read the entire column on Ha'aretz's website.](#)

8) Obama's Israel visit may mark rebirth of "centrality" of the Palestinian conflict

Chemi Shaley, Ha'aretz, February 6, 2013

As George Mallory famously said about Mount Everest, President Obama is going to visit Israel, first and foremost, "because it's there." After the heaps of criticism and mounds of condemnation hurled at him for avoiding Israel after his Cairo speech and throughout his first term, there was no way that Obama was going to let Air Force One enter Middle East air space without checking the "Israel visit" box first.

The timing, on the other hand, took many Washington insiders by surprise. It's easy to see how the early visit serves Benjamin Netanyahu's political purposes: He can dangle the prospect of an impending peace process to entice parties to his left to join his coalition, while warning of looming American pressure in order to cajole those on his right. This still doesn't explain the urgency for Obama, who had been widely expected to maintain "a low profile" in terms of his public presidential involvement with Israel and the Palestinians.

One of the reasons for the change, according to former U.S. ambassador and current Princeton professor Dan Kurtzer, is the very appointment of Secretary of State John Kerry. The Middle East peace process is "a major part" of Kerry's agenda, says Kurtzer; Obama's trip to Israel and the West Bank is aimed at stamping Kerry's efforts with a presidential seal of approval and removing any doubts about the support he enjoys from the White House.

Others ascribe the surprise timing of the visit to the darkening skies of the Middle East: Egypt is teetering, Syria is seething and the Iranian nuclear standoff is approaching crunch time. In fact, despite the short hiatus, the situation could deteriorate dramatically before Obama's reported March landing at Ben Gurion Airport, in any or all of these trouble spots. Under these precarious circumstances, the coordination and understanding between Obama and Netanyahu assume truly strategic importance.

But it is equally true that these are also the times that the long held view that the Israeli-Palestinian track can become an instrument for calming the area, soothing antagonism towards the U.S. and even assisting in the formation of a U.S.-led anti-Iranian coalition is bound to become doubly attractive.

This view, of the centrality and regional importance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - shunned by the current Israeli government and perhaps by most Israelis - is one more common denominator of the "Quartet" that will be running America's national security policy in the next four years: Obama, Vice President Biden, Kerry and the presumptive Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel (whose prospects for Senate confirmation were probably boosted by the news of Obama's impending visit, at least among concerned supporters of Israel).

This is also a critical part of the *weltanschauung* of most European leaders, including British Foreign Secretary William Hague, who has already urged Kerry to plunge head first into Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking. Given Kerry's natural propensities, and Europe's critical role in all three Middle East hot spots, it is perhaps no wonder that the renewal of talks between Israel and the Palestinians has been taken off the back burner, at the very least. Though no one should assume any dramatic breakthroughs, given the absolute paralysis of recent years, the very renewal of the "peace process" will be viewed as a major achievement.

It goes without saying that the visit will also be critical in determining the atmospherics of Israel-U.S. relations, in general, and of the hitherto problematic ties between Netanyahu and Obama, in particular. The chemistry between the two leaders will be carefully scrutinized, as will the decibels of the right-wing demonstrators who will inevitably be shouting "Obama Go Home" in front of his hotel. The potential for ill-advised provocations that will turn into national embarrassments and be broadcast on American TV is almost infinite.

The irony, of course, is that by coming to Israel so early in his second term, Obama is, in fact, fulfilling one of Mitt Romney main campaign promises, to make Israel the first place he visits as president. Standing next to Obama in the harsh spotlight of the international media, Netanyahu will have ample time to consider the gap between what is, and what might have been.

9) Can new Secretary of State bring peace to Israel and the Palestinians?

Cecily Hilleary, Voice of America, February 1, 2013

More than 40 years ago, U.S. Secretary of State William Rogers proposed a plan for peace between the Israelis and Palestinians and since then, more than a dozen of his successors have worked to negotiate peace between the two sides and failed.

John Kerry, confirmed and sworn in as secretary of State this week, plans to give it another try. During his confirmation hearings, Kerry warned the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that it would be disastrous if the two sides were unable to negotiate a so-called “two-state solution” creating a separate and sovereign Palestinian state alongside Israel.

But given the political and diplomatic situation in the Middle East and Washington, is there any reason to believe Kerry can succeed where so many of his predecessors have failed?

Kerry’s pledge not to “step back” from his commitment to Israel and the Palestinians echoed that of President Barack Obama, who in his 2009 “New Beginnings” speech in Cairo promised to “personally pursue” a two-state solution. Today, that outcome is looking remote.

Ori Nir is spokesperson for the Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group Americans for Peace Now. He says outgoing Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and U.S. special peace envoy George Mitchell made serious efforts on behalf of the Obama Administration to bring parties back to the table. “What happened is that Obama encountered pushback both from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the Israeli side and to an extent from the Palestinians,” he said.

In addition, says Nir, the U.S. leader came under resistance domestically from interest groups inside the United States who “were aligned with the right and extreme right in Israel and were protective mainly of the [Israeli West Bank] settlement enterprise.”

Natan Sachs is a Fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., and is not confident Kerry will be able to make any real headway.

“As far as we can tell, Senator Kerry appears eager to try and move this forward and perhaps make this his legacy issue. Since the White House is where most decisions are made at the end of the day, a grand approach such as we saw at the beginning of the Obama Administration is unlikely,” Sachs said.

Sachs says most of Obama’s advisers caution the president against any new peace initiative at a time when his plate is so full, both with domestic issues like the economy and foreign policy issues such as Iran and Syria.

That said, no one is betting against another U.S. push on the diplomatic front.

“At the end of the day, there is still a necessity in most people’s view to partition this land—whether it’s done through a full-fledged peace process or whether it’s done by very different means is another question, and I don’t know how it’s going to be done yet,” Sachs said. ...

[Read the entire piece here.](#)

10) [Walling in the Christian narrative](#)

Jeffrey Abood, *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, January-February 2013

The Christians in the Holy Land are a small yet, in the eyes of the world, very significant community. So much so, in fact, that it has become an important part of Israeli strategy to attempt to surround their voice with a wall of silence, working to ensure that it is not heard.

Seeking to shift blame from the fact that Christians are leaving the Holy Land because of a brutal occupation, the Israeli government continues to promote the misconception that the only place Christians “have it good is in Israel.” In an April 22, 2012 interview on CBS’s “60 Minutes” (available at <www.wrmea.org>), Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Michael Oren said, “The only place in the Middle East where Christians aren’t endangered but flourishing is Israel.”

This and similar statements often reiterated by U.S. supporters of Israel are, however, based on two false assumptions: that Christians are in fact “flourishing” in Israel, and that their increasing numbers are evidence of that.

“Flourishing” in Israel?: The Christians actually living in the Holy Land disagree with Israel’s self-serving assessment. About 155,000 Christians are citizens of Israel—less than 2 percent of its 7.9 million population, according to Ha’aretz. Archbishop Desmond Tutu has noted that they “suffer from over 35 discriminatory laws” affecting the population in everything from health care to education to where they can live or even worship. According to numerous polls and a recent EU Heads of Mission report: “Church leaders cite as reasons for increased emigration: Government of Israel-imposed family-reunification restrictions, limited ability of Christian communities in the Jerusalem area to expand due to confiscation of church properties and building restrictions, taxation problems and difficulties in obtaining residency permits for Christian clergy.”

Permanent vs. non-permanent Christian communities: It is vital to define who the Christian Israelis are, as well as their actual numbers, for two reasons. First, so that the church can equip itself to adequately provide pastoral care for them. Secondly, so that politicians cannot use the Holy Land’s Christian communities to further their own political agendas.

While on the surface some numbers may appear to be increasing, this is misleading, since they give no indication of permanence. There are in fact two categories of Christians in the Holy Land today: permanent and non-permanent.

The permanent Christian communities, whether in Israel, Gaza or the West Bank, are almost exclusively Palestinian. These are the indigenous Christians of the Holy Land, where they have lived for more than 2,000 years. Since the 1950s there has also been a small but growing community of Hebrew-speaking Christians. These number about 500 and comprise the Christian spouses of Jewish immigrants, Jews who have converted, and internally displaced Palestinians (those who have moved to larger cities within Israel looking for work and become more assimilated to the language).

[Read the entire piece here.](#)

**11) [Israel: Perched between hope and fear](#)
Simon Kuper, *Financial Times*, February 1, 2013**

I arrived in Israel thinking that when the earth collides with a meteorite 500 million years from now, Israelis and Palestinians will still be fighting. I came home more optimistic. There may actually be reason to hope.

Let's start with the bad stuff. The other day I stood on a hill overlooking the Palestinian West Bank. It's not a "bank" any more – it's more like a patchwork quilt. Little islands of Palestine are surrounded by Israeli settlements that just keep growing. It's easy to tell the Palestinian homes: they have black water tanks on the roof, because Israel doesn't assign them enough water.

Most of these Israeli settlers aren't religious extremists from Brooklyn with rifles. They are ordinary Israelis – teachers and computer programmers who want cheap homes. Even a few Israeli peace activists live in settlements.

For Palestinians in the West Bank, isolation keeps worsening. Raja Shehadeh, Palestinian writer and human rights lawyer who won Britain's Orwell Prize for his book *Palestinian Walks*, told me, "You cannot have a proper walk now, because on a proper walk you don't have to think about anything. Now you have to think about settlers, armies, wild boars."

Shehadeh lives in Ramallah, capital of the Palestinian Authority. It's 15 miles from Jerusalem, but walls and checkpoints make the trip almost impossible. Life in Gaza is much worse.

If you don't believe me, listen to six former chiefs of Israel's domestic intelligence service Shin Bet. They speak in the new Israeli documentary "The Gatekeepers," rightly nominated for an Oscar. I watched it in a packed cinema in Tel Aviv. "We are making millions of people's lives unbearable," says one ex-chief. "We have become cruel," says another. "When you retire," a third says of his job, "you become a bit of a leftie." No doubt American conservatives will dismiss them as "self-hating Jews."

Now for the optimism: peace may just be breaking out. Israel spent its early years fighting for its survival, with the Holocaust fresh in Israeli minds. But no Arab state has launched a war against Israel for 40 years.

Terror groups such as Hamas and Hizbollah have attacked, but as the former Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert told me, "We know how to fight terror."

Israel's current prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu keeps warning about future aggressors: Iran, perhaps the new Egypt, Syria post-Assad, etc. Netanyahu is a classic Israeli hawk, as defined by writer Amos Oz: "The hawks are convinced that the Jews are liable to some mysterious primeval curse, bound to remain forever isolated, hated and persecuted ... doves maintain there is no such mystical verdict."

The trend of history may be with the doves. War is in decline worldwide, as the Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker points out in his magnificent book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*. In part, states have learnt that war rarely achieves its goals. In part, mass media and international pressure put the brakes on prolonged bloodshed. Israel now gets only brief

windows to fight wars (“to cut the grass” as its army says) before the world intervenes. Hence its “mini-wars” of recent years in Gaza and Lebanon.

For now, there’s near-peace at home too: the occupied Palestinian territories are almost unprecedentedly quiet. Shin Bet says that last year, for the first time since 1973, no Israelis died in violence on the West Bank.

B’Tselem, the Israeli human rights group, calculates that from the end of the war in Gaza in January 2009 through October 2012, 422 people (mainly Palestinians) were killed in Israeli-Palestinian violence. That’s horrible – but it’s a far lower death rate than the homicide rate in a safer than ever New York City over the same period.

Israelis may never have lived so peacefully. True, that could end. Asma Agbarieh-Zahalka, of Israel’s joint Jewish-Arab socialist Da’am party, cautions: “The violence is waiting in a corner to explode. Many people are talking about the third intifada as something that will be.”

Yet for now anyway, relative peace is changing Israel. This was always a military state led by military heroes. But in last month’s elections, Netanyahu’s warnings about Iran found little resonance, and the big winner was television presenter Yair Lapid. Meanwhile former army chief Shaul Mofaz barely scraped into parliament with his Kadima party.

The election was fought largely on the cost of living. Partly that’s because few Israelis believe peace can be made with the Palestinians, but partly it’s because they are getting comfortable. Tel Aviv really has become a hip Mediterranean beach town with an IT boom. Military leaders worry that civilians are becoming less willing to sacrifice. “The country is more focused on living than on fighting, perhaps,” says Olmert. Israel’s top television programmes, he marvels, are now reality shows like MasterChef.

Israel’s appetite for using violence may just be diminishing. If the current peace holds a while, trust with Palestinians might grow. Optimism about this region may not be completely crazy.

12) Foundation for Middle East Bulletin, January-February 2013

[Read the entire January-February 2013 Report on Israeli Settlement in the Occupied Territories here.](#)