

Middle East Notes
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
March 28, 2013



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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 the visit of President Obama to Israel and the West Bank, speeches, comments and commentaries on his visit, and hopes for progress in resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

- The March 15 and March 21 Bulletins from Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) give information on President Obama's visit to Israel and the West Bank.
- Rashid Khalidi writes in *Jews for Justice for Palestinians (JFJFP)* that he hoped President Obama would abandon the stale conventional wisdom offered by the New York-Washington foreign-policy establishment, which clings to the crumbling remnants of a so-called peace process that, in the 34 years since the Camp David accords, has actually helped make peace less attainable than ever.
- JFJFP provides links for various comments and commentaries about President Obama's visits and speeches in Israel and the West Bank.
- Dahlia Scheindlin and Noam Sheizaf state in +972 that if the occupation was given an expiration date, there would be a way out of the present diplomatic dead end for the Israelis and Palestinians.
- Also in +972, Riman Barakat and Dan Goldenblatt write that it's time to acknowledge that the paradigm based on the notion that "we are here and they are there" is no longer feasible. What's needed is a shift from a separation paradigm to one of the national independence of two states on one land.
- Barak Ravid notes in Reuters that after President Obama returned to Washington, Secretary of State Kerry met with Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu to try and restart negotiations. Kerry was seeking confidence-building measures from both sides and exploring steps to renew peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.
- According to an ABC News/Washington Post poll released on March 18 most U.S. Americans want U.S. to stay out of Israeli-Palestinian talks. It also finds that 55 percent of U.S. Americans sympathize with Israel, compared to nine percent that side with Palestinians.
- *The Almond Tree*, written by Michelle Cohen Corasanti and published by Garnet Publishing in 2012, is an easy-to-read novel, and an accurate and poignant account of the Palestinian Israeli conflict through the experience of a Palestinian family.

1) Churches for Middle East Peace Bulletin March 15, 2013

... **Habemus coalition!** Hours after the proclamation "Habemus Papam!" on the St Peter's Basilica balcony during the historic announcement of Pope Francis, reports emerged that Prime Minister Netanyahu had finally put together a government. Netanyahu [was] expected to finalize and swear in a new broad based coalition ... two days before President Obama's arrival.

On Thursday, he reached a deal with his rivals Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid to form a government thanks to a combination of political promises and coveted ministry appointments. The coalition members mostly agree that the ultra-Orthodox should share more of the burden is Israeli society by making them eligible for the draft into the army for the first time and cutting government stipends that many religious families receive. Netanyahu has maintained an alliance with ultra-Orthodox parties for many years but this time they are not included in the government.

Including Bennett and Lapid in the government indicates there will also be efforts to reform elections and standardize the educational curriculum but they have diverging views on the peace process. Bennett is in favor of annexing large swaths of the West Bank into Israel while Lapid is vaguely supportive of a two state solution. Hebrew University political scientist Gideon Rahat says, "As long as it deals with domestic issues, it will remain stable. On the other hand, gaps between coalition members on foreign policy are very wide." ...

[Read the entire Bulletin on CMEP's website.](#)

Churches for Middle East Peace Bulletin March 22, 2013

Speaking to the Israeli people: ... Before [Obama's] trip the administration had set expectations so low "you'd think he was making another visit to Ohio" but after delivering a speech to a crowd of Israeli students, suddenly he has "raised expectations sky-high that he himself is going to work to make peace possible."

While the bulk of the president's time was spent laying wreaths and looking at tourist sites, the speech in Jerusalem spoke directly to the Israeli people "as a friend" and contained some tough love but few details or proposals. For many supportive of a two state solution, this was the moment they had been waiting for but as is expected in the region, not everyone was pleased. Here are some excerpts:

- "Politically, given the strong bipartisan support for Israel in America, the easiest thing for me to do would be to put this issue aside, and express unconditional support for whatever Israel decides to do. But I want you to know that I speak to you as a friend who is deeply concerned and committed to your future, and I ask you to consider three points."
- "First, peace is necessary. You can be the generation that permanently secures the Zionist dream, or you can face a growing challenge to its future. Given the demographics west of the Jordan River, the only way for Israel to endure and thrive as a Jewish and democratic state is through the realization of an independent and viable Palestine."
- "Second, peace is just... The Palestinian people's right to self-determination and justice must also be recognized. Put yourself in their shoes – look at the world through their eyes. It is not fair that a Palestinian child cannot grow up in a state of her own, and lives with the presence of a foreign army that controls the movements of her parents every single day. It is not just when settler violence against Palestinians goes unpunished. It is not right to prevent Palestinians from farming their lands; to restrict a student's ability to move around the West Bank; or to displace Palestinian families from their home. Neither occupation nor expulsion is the answer. Just as Israelis built a state in their homeland, Palestinians have a right to be a free people in their own land."
- "Which leads to my third point: peace is possible... Now is the time for the Arab world to take steps toward normalized relations with Israel. Meanwhile, Palestinians must recognize that Israel will be a Jewish state, and that Israelis have the right to insist upon their security. Israelis must recognize that continued settlement activity is counterproductive to the cause of peace, and that an independent Palestine must be viable– that real borders will have to be drawn."
- "Speaking as a politician, I can promise you this: political leaders will not take risks if the people do not demand that they do. You must create the change that you want to see." ...

Obama visits the West Bank: ... [During his brief venture into the West Bank, the] president again expressed his support of the two-state solution and sympathy for those living under occupation: "The Palestinian people deserve an end to occupation and the daily indignities that come with it. ...

"Palestinians deserve to move and travel freely, and to feel secure in their communities. Like people everywhere, Palestinians deserve a future of hope -- that their rights will be respected, that tomorrow will be better than today and that they can give their children a life of dignity and opportunity. Put simply, Palestinians deserve a state of their own." ...

[Read the entire Bulletin, which contains much more information, on CMEP's website.](#)

2) [Is any hope left for Middle East peace?](#)

Rashid Khalidi, Jews for Justice for Palestinians (JFJFP), posted on War in Context

March 12, 2013

What should Barack Obama ... do about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? First, he must abandon the stale conventional wisdom offered by the New York-Washington foreign-policy establishment, which clings to the crumbling remnants of a so-called peace process that, in the 34 years since the Camp David accords, has actually helped make peace less attainable than ever.

When the most recent iteration of this process began with high hopes at the Madrid peace conference in 1991, which led to the Oslo accords two years later, there were 200,000 Israelis illegally settled in the occupied Palestinian territories: today, there are more than twice as many. During this time, under four successive presidents, the United States, purportedly acting as an honest broker, did nothing to prevent Israel from gradually gobbling up the very land the two-state solution was to be based on.

Until 1991 most Palestinians, although under Israeli military occupation, could nonetheless travel freely. Today, an entire generation of Palestinians has never been allowed to visit Jerusalem, enter Israel or cross between the West Bank and Gaza. This ghettoization of the Palestinians, along with the unrest of the second intifada of 2000-2005 and the construction of seemingly permanent settlements and of an apartheid-style wall, are the tragic fruits of the so-called peace process the United States has led.

The “peace process” has consisted of indulging Israeli intransigence over Palestine in exchange for foreign-policy goals unrelated to the advancement of peace and Palestinian freedom. In the late 1970s this involved the strategic cold war prize of moving Egypt from the Soviet column to the American column.

The Camp David accord between Prime Minister Menachem Begin and President Anwar el-Sadat essentially set aside the “Palestinian question.” These constraints shaped the Oslo process, in which Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization recognized each other, while all fundamental issues like borders, refugees, water, Israeli settlements and the status of Jerusalem were deferred.

Toward the end of his first term, Mr. Obama essentially abandoned his already modest peacemaking agenda in exchange for a lull in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s campaign for war with Iran. Palestine was again sacrificed, this time to bribe a belligerent Israel for temporary good behavior. ...

[Read the entire piece here.](#)

3) Put simply, Palestinians deserve a state of their own

Jews for Justice for Palestinians, March 23, 2013

Inevitably, there were very many comments on this speech (though none so far from Palestinians). Below are listed eight articles pertaining to President Obama’s visit to Israel and the West Bank:

- a) Transcript: Obama and Abbas press conference
- b) Amira Hass: Obama is more Jewish than the Jews
- c) AFP: Obama in direct peace appeal to young Israelis
- d) Transcript: Barack Obama’s speech in Jerusalem
- e) Rabbi Michael Lerner (Tikkun) on Obama’s speech
- f) Dahlia Scheindlin: Obama’s speech: The view from the crowd
- g) Moriel Rothman: Five positive points in Obama’s Jerusalem speech
- h) Richard Falk: What was wrong with Obama’s speech in Jerusalem

[Access the eight pieces listed above at the JFJFP website.](#)

4) Giving the occupation an expiration date
Dahlia Scheindlin and Noam Sheizaf, +972 blog,
March 19, 2013

The Israeli-Palestinian negotiation process has reached a dead end. The two-state paradigm has been deemed unrealistic so many times, that mentioning it creates cynicism and bitterness in both societies. But a generally agreed alternative to the principle of partition has not yet emerged.

We therefore suggest a new framework for diplomatic engagement, one that carries with it a clear deadline.

Without diminishing the many facets, layers and problems in the conflict (refugees, land, control over resources, holy sites, sovereignty and national self-determination), one issue is the most urgent and pressing for the region, and it is also the most obvious: ending the military occupation.

Under the current circumstances, even international and local actors' best intentions in seeking to resolve the conflict have no direction. New political negotiations are likely to be fruitless, disappointing and as a result, dangerous.

Ending the occupation is key to advancing any comprehensive solution, and it carries a special moral urgency.

Defining a unique problem: The occupation presents a unique problem. Israel's control over Palestinians is an infinite source of violence and instability. It generates daily rage among Palestinians and leaves no one untouched. It crushes any possibility for sustainable economic viability or dignified livelihood. Palestinians are unable to build genuine political institutions, because they are all subject to the sovereignty of Israeli military law.

With regards to ending it, we propose the following definition for the occupation:

1. Ruling a population under military law (including Palestinian self-government, which is circumscribed by Israeli military law).
2. The expansion of settlement rights for one population at the expense of another population. This includes de facto settlement, legislation to legitimize settlement, financial and infrastructural support.
3. A situation in which two people live side by side in the same territory under two different legal systems.
4. The imposition of heavy restrictions on both domestic and international travel on one population while the other is free to travel, settle, and enter and exit international ports at will.
5. Israel's use of natural resources in the West Bank to favor the Jewish population, while heavy restrictions are placed on Palestinian use of those resources.

In addition to the West Bank, this definition also applies to territories in and around Jerusalem that were annexed to Israel in 1967, since three of the five conditions above apply to them. For the Gaza Strip, "ending occupation" at this stage would mainly mean freedom of movement for goods and people across Gaza's borders, and lifting restrictions on the entry through and use of land and sea borders.

Two mechanisms: Cooperative and coercive: We envision two possible mechanisms to achieve the goal of ending the military occupation. Either the two sides devote the next round of negotiations to reaching an agreement on how to end it, or the international community must demand and impose an end of the occupation (there is a difference between imposing an end to the occupation and imposing a resolution for the overall conflict, and the latter is not advisable). ...

[Read the entire piece on the +972 blog.](#)

5) National independence and sharing the land

Riman Barakat and Dan Goldenblatt, +972blog

March 20, 2013

As President Obama's arrives for a visit to Israel and Palestine, many Palestinians and Israelis do not anticipate any euphoric moments or breakthroughs with regards to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Beyond the list of actions and words that Obama will address with regards to Israel's regional fears and the Palestinian concern that the two-state solution is no longer feasible, President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry should have something to offer to a right-wing hawkish Israeli government, which is not likely to promote a two-state solution, and to a Palestinian Authority that is very close to collapse as its economic situation worsens. What is needed is for the United States to offer a slight but fundamental shift in the paradigm.

Almost 20 years ago, Yitzak Rabin, who shook hands with President Yasser Arafat on the White House lawn, called for a paradigm based on the notion that "we are here and they are there," not a sharing approach. We argue for a shift from a separation paradigm to one of sharing. But there are several logical steps to go through before we switch paradigms:

1. Declaration of a Palestinian state and recognition by the U.S. and Israel: What cannot be ignored or circumvented is that a Palestinian state must be established in order to grant Palestinians as a people their basic right to self-determination. Israel is the only Jewish state in the world and it must remain such. Any solution that will threaten the Jewishness of the State of Israel is doomed to fail. Two peoples who have been caught up in a national struggle for over a century cannot be expected to give up their national aspirations and leap into post-nationalism. A one-state solution is therefore a non-starter. Any solution must ensure that Israel maintains a Jewish majority and remains a democracy, and that the Palestinians establish their self-determination and sovereignty.
2. Acknowledge the fact that the separation paradigm is bound to fail: We ought to acknowledge that "we are here, they are there," is not only no longer feasible, but fundamentally defies the emotional and deep connection that both peoples in the Land of Israel/Palestine hold to the land. On the one hand, all religious sites connecting Jews to the holy land are located in the West Bank/Judea and Samaria/Palestine. On the other hand, all the Palestinian refugees come from over 500 villages that were destroyed in Israel's War of Independence in 1948 (known as the Palestinian catastrophe – the Nakba) that are located in today's Israel. Any solution that does not account for these established historical connections is doomed to fail. This is probably the primary reason why all efforts, initiatives, road maps and accords have not succeeded in finding a solution that had buy-in from the Israeli and Palestinian public. Ideological settlers continue to lobby the Israeli government to build more settlements as long as they believe that their right to reside in the West Bank is threatened. Any Palestinian leader, no matter how popular, will fail to convince the Palestinian public to support a peace agreement that deprives Palestinians of the right to visit or reside in the coastal plains from which they came.
3. Propose a solution that will respect the sovereignty of both states while strengthening the sharing paradigm. Here we propose a formula of two states in one space.

The challenge lies in squaring the circle, in answering the needs of both peoples (not allowing the marginal elements to set the agenda), in putting forward a proposal that provides an acceptable solution to the key issues. We would also suggest a different list of priorities. The most important key issue must be freedom of movement. This has been proven through the continued failure of the process to date. The second is the human element. ...

[Read the entire piece on the +972 blog.](#)

6) Obama returns to Washington, Kerry stays behind to try and restart negotiations

Barak Ravid, Reuters, March 24, 2013

U.S. President Barak Obama flew home to Washington on [March 23] after wrapping up a four-day Middle East trip, leaving Secretary of State John Kerry behind to explore steps to renew peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

Kerry met with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Amman on [March 23], and later with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Other Israelis in attendance included Justice Minister Tzipi Livni in her capacity as negotiator with the Palestinians, National Security Advisor Yaakov Amidror and Netanyahu's special envoy Isaac Molcho.

Kerry has follow-up visits scheduled for April and May. He intends to invest three to six months in getting talks renewed, and believes negotiations should focus first on the borders of the Palestinian State and Israel's security concerns.

Before leaving for Jordan on [March 22], President Obama held a two-hour meeting with Netanyahu and briefed him on his talks with Abbas. Netanyahu insisted that future talks should also address Israel's security concerns due to the Arab Spring.

A senior U.S. official told Ha'aretz that Obama and Kerry urged Netanyahu and Abbas to carry out confidence-building steps to enable the resumption of serious negotiations.

"We believe that there does need to be a positive environment around those talks so that steps do need to build trust and confidence so that both parties feel invested in a process that can work. So that was the message that we conveyed," the official said.

Obama and Kerry said they would not accept any pre-conditions to talks, such as a settlement freeze, but told Netanyahu that in order for negotiations to succeed, Israel must not do anything to undermine them such as expanding settlements or announcing plans to do so.

Obama stopped short of demanding a settlement freeze, as he did in November 2009, but expects Netanyahu to take "quiet actions" to rein in construction. Still, the Americans demanded a halt to the controversial building plans for the E1 area between Ma'aleh Adumim and Jerusalem, which would cut the West Bank into two parts. "Clearly, settlements are counterproductive. Clearly, if you move forward with something like E1, that's clearly going to be an impediment to achieving peace. So there's a context through which we would ask Israel to look at settlement activity," said the U.S. official.

Kerry urged Netanyahu to take a number of confidence-building measures, most importantly the release of Palestinian prisoners - the Palestinian Authority has demanded that Israel free some 120 prisoners who have been in jail since before the Oslo accords; the secretary of state has also urged Israel to continue to remove checkpoints in the West Bank, and approve Palestinian Authority projects in Area C, which is under Israeli military and civilian control.

On the political front, Yair Lapid and Naftali Bennett, Netanyahu's main coalition partners remained silent as regards to the diplomatic maneuvering that took place during the weekend. People close to Bennett said he may comment on Sunday. Lapid said he "spoke at length with John Kerry on the importance of restarting the peace negotiations," but offered no further information. ...

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

7) ABC poll: Most Americans want U.S. to stay out of Israeli-Palestinian talks

Ha'aretz, March 18, 2013

Most Americans, regardless of political sympathies, believe the United States should cease its intervention in the Israeli-Palestinian talks, an ABC poll released on [March 18] reveals.

The poll, produced for ABC by Langer Research Associates, shows that 55 percent of Americans sympathize with Israel compared to only nine percent that side with the Palestinian Authority; the rest of those questioned were undecided. ...

[See full ABC News/Washington Post poll results here.](#)

The ABC poll also found that seven in 10 of those questioned – regardless of which side they support - prefer to leave the negotiations to the Palestinians and the Israelis, rather than seeing the U.S. take a leading role.

The ABC News poll results emphasize that 66 to 70 percent of those questioned - regardless of religious and political affiliation - believe that the two sides should handle negotiations without U.S. intervention. According to the ABC News poll, American support for Israel is illustrated by 34 percent saying the Obama administration has put too little pressure on the Palestinian Authority with only eight percent polled responding that there is too much pressure.

In contrast, the split is about even concerning the question of whether the administration has put too much or too little pressure on Israel. About four in 10 Americans, think the U.S. has appropriately pressured each side in the conflict.

Religion is a factor in the poll's results, with support for Israel being highest among evangelical white Protestants at 76 percent and falls to 55 percent among non-evangelical white Protestants and Catholics. Those who are not religiously affiliated have the least amount of sympathy for Israel with only 39 percent polled affirming support.

Republicans and conservatives alike show the most support for Israel among partisan groups - more than seven in 10. This number drops to about five in 10 moderates, independents and Democrats, and to just 39 percent of liberals, with more saying they favor neither Israel nor the Palestinian Authority. Age is another influence on American public opinion about Israel, with two-thirds of seniors showing support. A little less than half (48 percent) of younger adults polled side with the Jewish state, and 57 percent of 40- to 64-year-olds. The majority of seniors also think the Obama administration is putting too much pressure on Israel and not enough on the Palestinian Authority. ...

8) The Almond Tree

Written by Michelle Cohen Corasanti

Published by Garnet Publishing in 2012, [The Almond Tree](#) is an easy to read novel, and an accurate and poignant account of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict through the experience of a Palestinian family. The characters are fictional but the reality in which they live is based on many actual incidents and events in the lives of Palestinians and Israelis since 1955. Michelle Corasanti is a Jewish U.S. American with a law degree, a BA from Hebrew University, and a MA from Harvard University, both in Middle Eastern Studies. Her seven years living in Israel and friendships with Jewish and Palestinian friends in both Israel and the U.S. inspired her to write this first novel. Middle East Notes recommends *The Almond Tree* as both a powerful introduction to and emotional experience of this tragic conflict. It is an affirmation of hope for the many Palestinians, Jews and their friends in Israel, Palestine and the U.S. working for peace, security and justice for all.