Perspective

A Palestinian Writer and an Israeli Writer Exchange Emails — and Seek Common Ground

Israeli missiles seek to intercept Hamas missiles. (Anas Baba/AFP/Getty Images)

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In the wake of the recent fighting in Israel and Palestine, The Washington Post Magazine asked two writers — Sam Bahour, a Palestinian American writer and entrepreneur who lives near Ramallah; and Nadav Eyal, an Israeli journalist who lives near Tel Aviv — to correspond with each other. Their exchange, which was lightly edited, took place between May 24 and May 31. To get the conversation started, we posed an initial question: Realistically, where do Palestinians and Israelis go from here?

Hi Nadav,

Glad to make your acquaintance via The Washington Post. It is so ironic that I meet so many Israelis by way of U.S. organizations even though we live less than an hour apart from one another. Maybe that is a confirmation of how deeply involved the U.S. is in our region, for better or for worse.

Before jumping into our conversation, I want to ask if you and your family are all physically okay after these two difficult weeks? Where exactly do you reside? My wife and I are fine, physically that is. We live in my ancestral home in al-Bireh, the sister city of Ramallah. I assume you know the location; it is where the Israeli military headquarters for the West Bank and the Israeli settlement of Beit El are located.

I know you work in Tel Aviv in media and have done amazing work over the years. I see you have a newly published book out in the U.S. on the rise of nationalism and populism. What a timely topic, especially as it applies to Palestine/Israel these days. I look forward to reading it.

I own and operate a management consulting firm in Ramallah, Applied Information Management (AIM). I relocated to Palestine in 1995 with my wife and our first daughter — we have two now — from Youngstown, Ohio. I decided to relocate after the Oslo accords were signed to be part of the establishment of Palestine's first telecommunications company, Paltel. Since then, I also led the establishment of the first large-scale shopping center and supermarket chain here. During those years of large-scale projects, I attended the joint MBA program at Tel Aviv University, in partnership with Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill.

Israeli airstrikes in Gaza. (Ibraheem Abu Mustafa/Reuters)

So, I've been asked to start our conversation by addressing the question, "Realistically, where do Palestinians and Israelis go from here?" To be honest, even this seemingly innocent question is provocative. It makes it sound like we were on a road trip together and got lost, and all that we need to focus on now is in which direction to keep driving. I wish it were so straightforward.

I feel the situation today is more like a colossal failure of all the stakeholders, but mainly Israel, given that it is the controlling party between the Mediterranean Sea and Jordan River. It is, as I have been preaching for decades, as if Israel was driving toward a cliff, and during the last several years its friends and foes were warning it that, if it continues to pretend that it has no responsibility to structurally change course, it will fall off. Trump came and put his foot on top of this Israeli right-wing government's foot and pressed the accelerator even harder. The result, although no one could predict the extent and details, is exactly where we have reached: yet another breakdown of civility. Israel fell off the cliff, and Hamas followed them down the same cliff. This round of violence introduced another angle, above and beyond the occupied territory, which is the violence in Israel among citizens, and between the Israeli state and its Palestinian citizens. This new angle is no less dangerous than the relationship breakdown between Israel and Gaza and/or the Palestinians under military occupation.

It is difficult to think of where we go from here since "here" is not a static point in time. Yes, the cease-fire, albeit fragile, is still holding, but the occupation did not take a vacation. It is alive and kicking, sometimes literally, in Gaza, East Jerusalem and throughout the West Bank. So, before we go anywhere new, I think it is a priority to stop the damage, and that will mean the introduction of serious international protection of the population, for the sake of both Israelis and Palestinians. Would you agree to this as a first step?

Best,

Sam

Dear Sam,

It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, albeit online. I agree as to the irony of our meeting through an American initiative but am mostly grateful that such ideas still arise; these days it sometimes seems like everyone in Washington just wants to forget about the Middle East. While I can understand the sentiment, I also fear it.

I last visited Ramallah a couple of months ago for a few meetings — some over coffee, others over falafel — in my capacity as a journalist. But I have to admit this does not happen as often as it should. I've heard about you from friends in the NGO community. They have always spoken highly of you (of course, I also Googled!). They said you are a "doer." I am a journalist and you are an entrepreneur. I come from a family of engineers, entrepreneurs and laborers, so I am used to being humbled by people who actually build things rather than reflect in words. In your case it is even more impressive: not only building businesses, from telecommunications to shopping malls, but also doing so in a very complex reality — on the crater of a political volcano.

You asked if my family is "physically okay," and this phrasing is so precise. Thank you, they are. When you write that your wife and you "are fine, physically that is," I am inclined to ask if you might elaborate beyond the physical. I know al-Bireh and visited the area many times as a reporter in the West Bank. Did events in Jerusalem spill over and influence your daily life?

Our children are 3, 7 and 10, and we live near Kiryat Ono, not far from Tel Aviv. No rockets landed in our town, but since it's close to the airport, which was targeted, we heard explosions and our windows shook while we spent some nights in the fortified room. Lots of conversations with our kids there.

LEFT: A Palestinian protester prepares to hurl stones at Israeli security forces in the Gaza Strip, controlled by Hamas, in May. (Said Khatib/AFP/Getty Images) RIGHT: Palestinian children play near damaged buildings in Gaza. (Mahmud Hams/AFP/Getty Images)

I do think, like you, that we are facing a colossal failure of all stakeholders and this is the reason for our mutual plights. And you are right that Israel should have taken a proactive approach, which it did not in the last decade. Yet saying we reached a breaking point — the recent escalation in East Jerusalem and Gaza — because of Trump or Israel is much too narrow of a scope, in my opinion; did we not witness an even longer and deadlier confrontation in 2014, during President Obama's term? And another one, two years earlier?

I think we might agree that for more than a decade now, both Israelis and Palestinians have suffered a crisis of leadership. On the Israeli side, it is obvious Prime Minister Netanyahu considers a viable, contiguous Palestinian state a threat to Israel and believes the conflict cannot be resolved, an approach that led to the strengthening of Hamas and all those who resist the two-state solution (or any other viable solution, for that matter).

For their part, Palestinian leaders did not seriously consider past Israeli peace offers; there have not been elections for many years to the Palestinian parliament; and, importantly, Palestinian politics is locked in a historic clash between Hamas and Fatah over which party and what ideology represents the Palestinian people.

The last point is crucial. Hamas is, literally, celebrating. I too think that Sheikh Jarrah Palestinian families should remain in their houses, and that it is an injustice — and folly — to evict them. Yet this did not naturally develop into a war in Gaza. Something unusual unfolded: Without precedent, Hamas decided to shoot rockets at Jerusalem, a clear attempt to dominate the entire Palestinian political sphere, to own the conflict in Jerusalem, knowing that Israel will react strongly. So, Hamas didn't fall off the cliff with Israel — it pushed and is pushing all moderate Israelis and Palestinians there.

I do not want to respond too swiftly to your suggestion of international protection. Could you elaborate about what kind of protection? Who will enforce it and how will it work?

Sincerely,

Nadav

P.S.: Sending my book to your office!

Hi Nadav,

Please do not understate the need to "reflect in words." I am a strong believer that words matter, in politics as much as in business.

I think I know the area where you reside; it is near Bar-Ilan University. I used to know Israeli streets and locations extremely well since, when I relocated here in 1995, I was only able to enter as an American tourist. That allowed me to buy an Israeli-registered car and drive on both sides of the Green Line. However, being on a tourist visa for 15 years also meant I had the nerve-racking need to exit Israel (Israel/Palestine) every three months (sometimes less) to renew my visa, never knowing if Israel would allow me to reenter. I was only able to secure an Israeli-issued West Bank residency status, based on marriage, in 2009, which meant that I was no longer able to own or drive an Israeli-registered car and was no longer able to enter Israel without Israeli permission. So, although I drove three times a week for two years to attend my Tel Aviv-based MBA program, today I am considered a security threat and cannot reach it without Israeli military permission. Does the average Israeli citizen know that Israel treats American citizens differently, depending on if you're Jewish or not?

Glad to hear that your family is safe. We have two daughters, Areen, 27, and Nadine, 21. Areen graduated from MIT in chemical engineering and is now working with a start-up in Cambridge, and Nadine is a rising senior at Harvard studying neuroscience. We are proud of them, both products of Palestine's education system.

Beyond being safe, physically, we are deeply troubled by what is and has been developing in Gaza and across the occupied territory. The events in Jerusalem and Gaza, like any high-profile event across Palestine, spill over into Ramallah. As you are aware, the Ramallah/al-Bireh area is surrounded like all Palestinian cities by the Israeli occupation. Coming from the south you have the infamous and extremely dangerous Qalandia checkpoint, to the west is the Israeli Ofer Prison, adjacent to the commercial crossing point into Jerusalem (actually it's a checkpoint that is totally in the West Bank, so it divides the West Bank, not the West Bank and Jerusalem), to the east is the Israeli Psagot settlement, and to the north is the Beit El settlement adjacent to the West Bank Israeli military headquarters. I'm sure your media showed the massive demonstrations and clashes with the Israeli soldiers at the northern entrance — it was widely covered — and several Palestinian youths were shot dead there as hundreds were injured by tear gas, metal-coated rubber bullets and live ammunition. Our house is a good distance from the checkpoint, near the al-Bireh municipality, yet we inhaled tear gas on many days while sitting at home. As you know as well, we have no shelters here.

Our house is a good distance from the checkpoint, near the al-Bireh municipality, yet we inhaled tear gas on many days while sitting at home.

— Sam Bahour

I note your take on my view of the situation reaching a "breaking point" with Trump. I do not see that as being "narrow" because my reference was not to outbreaks of all-out fighting, which did not happen under Trump. My reference to Trump was the political and structural damage he facilitated. That noted, I hear you and fully agree: Successive past U.S. administrations have all failed. During Trump's follies, I wrote a piece explaining all the opportunities the U.S. missed when Palestinians were reaching out to advance the resolution of the conflict. If you are interested, it was titled "America's Incompetent Middle East Leadership."

Saying both sides suffer "a crisis of leadership" is the understatement of the century. I agree 100 percent. However, may I take you up on your examples? Yes, Netanyahu and his party for sure do not agree with a real Palestinian state; therefore, it never, ever appeared in any Likud platform. But isn't that true today for all other Jewish Israeli political parties too, including Labor? Today, not one such party supports a Palestinian state in their party platform. Back to the idea that words matter, here they matter a lot. Then you compare this lack of leadership of Israel's ruling party to the position of a single political entity on the Palestinian side, which is not yet within our political agency, the PLO. That is like comparing apples and oranges. Noting the inapt comparison, but if you want to compare stand-alone groupings, then, on the Israeli side, instead of Likud, we could refer to the aggressive young Jewish settlers known as the "hilltop youth" in the West Bank or the racist (even in Israeli terms) Meir Kahane's followers in the Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power) party, but even the latter is not a fair comparison since it is an accepted part of the formal political system.

I would also disagree with you regarding Palestinian leaders not seriously considering past Israeli peace offers. I think history has now proven there were no such offers, but rather Israelis negotiating with themselves and framing it as progress. We see how well that worked in Camp David. It's all water under the bridge, but we must learn the lessons if we don't want to repeat the mistakes of the past.

I've thought and written extensively on internal Palestinian politics during the past two years, and I would adjust your "locked" example by taking it one step further. Our politics here are locked between representative leadership and autocracy. This is much more dangerous than two parties competing to lead, as we can now see as it plays out in death and destruction.

Today, U.S. Secretary of State Blinken arrived in Ramallah. I assume you covered or are following his morning visit to Israel. Did you read Biden's statement about the goals of Blinken's trip? One of the goals is to restart the peace process. What can be more disingenuous, rewarding violence again? I know it is only wishful thinking, but with continuous failure by the U.S. over decades here, I wonder if they have not become Israel's greatest liability. Israel seems to refuse to see reality because this heavyweight superpower keeps the blinders on and keeps the funds flowing.

It means a tremendous deal to me to know that you too think that "Sheikh Jarrah Palestinian families should remain in their houses, and that it is an injustice — and folly — to evict them." I fully agree with you that this event in Sheikh Jarrah did not naturally develop into a war. It was a conscious decision, but by whom — Hamas alone, or Bibi's provocations in Sheikh Jarrah, on the Damascus Gate steps, and raiding the al-Aqsa Mosque on the holiest night of Ramadan, all as he was watching his prime minister position being pulled out from underneath him? I would still claim, as has been the case so many times before, that Bibi begged for violence and knew exactly where he could find it, as Sharon did before him, but the surprise was the intensity of Hamas's reply.

My suggestion of international protection is not a new concept; it is codified in international law and is part and parcel of the global system of governance. Such U.N. peacekeeping missions are active today in Western Sahara, Central African Republic, Mali, Democratic Republic of Congo, Golan, Cyprus, Lebanon, Abyei, Kosovo, South Sudan, India and Pakistan. Most surprisingly to all is that there is also a protection deployment here, based in Jerusalem. It is called the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO). UNTSO was the first-ever peacekeeping operation established by the United Nations, set up in 1949. However, this deployment does not have troops on the ground, merely civilians and experts on mission. My suggestion is that this Middle East peacekeeping mission be given an expanded mandate to bring troops to make sure that Israel's occupation is lawfully administered until it ends. Although technically as per the Fourth Geneva Convention the people under occupation, the Palestinians, are a "protected people," I expect such protection also protects Israeli civilians.

Sorry for the long-winded reply, and thanks for sending me a copy of your book.

Best,

Sam

Sam,

I was sorry to read about the violence in Ramallah. One thing that happened in the last two weeks is that everything blew up — not only Gaza, not only Jerusalem or the West Bank, but as you wrote before, even Israeli cities and towns. We have never seen anything like it.

You raise a lot of issues, and for this dialogue to be fruitful, I feel we need to distinguish between how we see the facts of the past (on some we clearly differ) and how we talk about possible futures. I'll begin with your suggestion of an international peacekeeping force, resisting a temptation to address your points one by one.

First, I am open to considering any idea. All of the Israeli prime ministers since 1999 have publicly recognized the need for a two-state solution (Did they mean it? Did Yasser Arafat mean it? We can debate it all day). As the prospects for a two-state solution become more daunting, it is a good point to examine alternatives and consider new ideas.

Frankly, I don't think a U.N. peacekeeping force can be effective in our context, and I am certain it is impractical for multiple reasons: The mandate you described is vague and could be confrontational — how will it protect the Palestinians? If there's a riot near Qalandia, will the U.N. engage? Will Israel? Is the peacekeeping force to shoot at Israeli soldiers attempting to arrest a Hamas operative?

Peacekeeping forces are most effective when they are the product of an agreement between parties, their mandate clearly defined. The Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) that oversees the Israel-Egypt agreement in the Sinai is a prime example of success. But the MFO is the exception to the rule; most international forces have been useless in our region. For example, the U.N. force in south Lebanon (UNIFIL) had its mandate expanded after Israel completed its internationally recognized withdrawal from Lebanon. But UNIFIL didn't stop Hezbollah from turning south Lebanon into a fortified base of operations, amassing stockpiles of missiles and then launching a sneak attack in 2006 that sparked the devastating Second Lebanon War. Elsewhere, peacekeeping missions have routinely proven ineffective in protecting civilians — in former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and in many other cases. Would such a force lead to a viable solution? Or maintain a poisonous status quo?

Israeli emergency workers evacuate a woman after a rocket fired from the Gaza Strip hit in central Ramat Gan, near Tel Aviv, in May. (Abir Sultan/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock)

A Palestinian woman sorts through rubble in her home in Beit Hanoun in the Gaza Strip last month. (Fatima Shbair/Getty Images)

Even if you are still unconvinced, let me provide an assessment: Israel will never allow the U.N. or any international body to deploy forces who would limit the freedom of the IDF to protect Israeli citizens. Definitely not when you have Hamas and Islamic Jihad, hundreds of thousands of settlers and a topography that overlooks Israel's coastal areas, where the majority of Israelis live. It stems from a national ethos; Jewish history does not favor promises of foreigners for protection.

But more constructively, allow me to describe what I think is an effective and realistic route. First, our leaders need to start talking again, directly. Instead of aiming high for a conflict-ending agreement, they need to begin this conversation, for instance, with the way you described al-Bireh and your burden of day-to-day life, freedom of movement and occupation. I was in the room when Prime Minister Ariel Sharon told Likud MKs, plainly and in Hebrew, that keeping "3.5 million Palestinians under occupation is bad for Israel and the Palestinians." I am recounting this to demonstrate that we can find support for on-the-ground steps forward. I am aiming for these modest achievements initially because they are attainable. After years of failures, any success, even a humble one, is important.

The principle is this: We are two peoples in conflict, with unfixed borders and asymmetrical power. The rivals of compromise, on both sides, will use all means to destroy such change, and unlike in the past we need to be one or two steps ahead. We need joint task forces made up of both Palestinians and Israelis, sitting all day in one place, representatives of civil and military bodies, operating as constant intervention teams. These will deal not only with security threats but also with crises of trust, of daily miseries and humiliation, and deal with them together. Wars have their war rooms, and so reconciliation needs also its room.

While the leadership starts improving lives and shows a renewed usefulness of both Israeli government and the Palestinian leadership, the sides should aim for a reunification of the political representation of Palestinians. Hamas took over Gaza from the PA 14 years ago, conducting a military coup and executing Fatah officials. Israel embraced a strategy of division and heightened rivalry between Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza; as you know by now, I think it was a terrible policy. For any agreement there needs to be one agreed-upon political entity representing the interests of the Palestinian people, which will make commitments on their behalf. I would not be so arrogant as to propose how to solve the inner Palestinian conflict and would love if you could share your ideas.

Then, the two sides should resume negotiations, with one serious difference: The international community should be ready to push aggressively and, if needed, present an international bridging proposal of its own. It's critical that both sides know such a proposal is in the works. They'll need someone to blame for the concessions they are about to make.

We have no time. A few years ago, I traveled to the former Yugoslavia, driving from Croatia through Bosnia to Serbia. I met Bosnian Muslim families that lost their loved ones in the genocide in Srebrenica. I also met Bosnian Serbs who were imprisoned for war crimes. I talked with a man who narrowly escaped the killing fields, with the president of Serbia, and with teens dreaming of abolishing the segregating lines between different ethno-national communities in torn Bosnia. "Everybody has his own Jerusalem," said one Serb to me. "Beware of what we all would do for it."

What I saw is how old feuds, if not tackled, explode, and neighbors rise and kill each other. Anger keeps the memory alive, and rage is inherited. Yugoslavia had the highest level of living in the Eastern Bloc, yet it deteriorated to endless wars. It's not all about the economy; it's also about identity, dignity and momentum forward. The people I met told me: What are you waiting for in Israel/Palestine? For this to become utterly unsolvable? If you can have two states, even a 1 percent chance for something that grants more dignity and security, why not try? For the region to be abandoned by its young talents, which is what we experience?

You know, people always say that Israel and Palestine have such potential. Well, they should also remember it won't necessarily stay that way. It depends on the brilliance of people like your daughters, and the parents who educate them.

Quick notes: Of course Zionist party platforms include Palestinian statehood. Look at Labor's and Meretz's and, most important, centrist Yair Lapid's. But these platforms are much less important than public speeches or polls, like this one that shows stable support for this solution. At least 55 of 120 Israeli MKs come from parties that support a Palestinian state.

I disagree with your portrayal of Israeli leaders making no real offers for peace. Prime Minister Ehud Barak was thrown out of office for unprecedented (even if ill-prepared) peace proposals he made in 2000-2001. Abu Mazen froze in the face of Ehud Olmert's proposal in the 2007 Annapolis process, including a detailed map for two states that suggested a Palestinian state on areas the size of lands occupied by Israel in 1967 and on similar borders. Negotiations and Oslo were not a ploy, and the sentiment of many Israelis seeking to end the conflict, and the occupation with it, is authentic. I grew up with this sentiment: Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated for his support of peace that encompassed national self-determination for Palestinians. I was there when it happened, demonstrating on a warm November night in Tel Aviv. I was 16.

Best,

N.

Good evening, Nadav,

Sadly, if we speak of violence, we have been here before. In Gaza, for sure, but the violence of the occupation has been nonstop for decades: before then Lebanon, multiple times, etc. What has been changing since the first intifada is that social media and citizen journalism are bringing the violence and occupation into everyone's living room. They all may be shocked. We are not. We have been living the violence of settlements, settlers, economic strangulation, house demolitions, arbitrary arrests, killings, and on and on for an exceptionally long time.

Successive Israeli prime ministers parroting the words "two states," with Bibi putting 140 adjectives in front of it, is one thing, but transforming these words into policy is something very different. I was never a fan of Arafat, but one fact must be noted: He transformed the PLO acceptance of two states into policy, first in 1988 with the Palestinian Declaration of Independence, then explicitly and in writing at the outset of the Oslo process, politically recognizing the state of Israel. Israel missed a huge opportunity not reciprocating with the recognition of the state of Palestine. Some may believe that this is all water under the bridge now, but I think unless Palestine, the new Palestine based on the 1967 lines, is accepted by Israel we will be moving to many more rounds of violence. I recently co-authored a New York Times opinion piece that envisions a positive joint future of Palestine and Israel in a confederal arrangement.

I agree that a U.N. peacekeeping force will need a lot of details worked out, but the mechanism's success or failure elsewhere should not deter it from being seriously considered. Ideally, it would maintain a peace agreement, but lacking that here, it can make sure this military occupation is lawfully undertaken. Is that not worth the effort? How else are "protected people" to be protected, as stated in the body of law that regulates military occupations, if not by third parties? The alternative is that we Palestinians are totally exposed to Israel's brute force and total impunity, which will reach yet another boiling point when any grouping of Palestinians reacts in kind.

You say, "Israel will never allow the U.N. or any international body to deploy forces who would limit the freedom of the IDF to protect Israeli citizens. ... It stems from a national ethos; Jewish history does not favor promises of foreigners for protection." But what if the state accepts committing war crimes or crimes against humanity as a legitimate means to protect Israeli citizens? Once Israel entered the community of nations it signed on to a rules-based world. It cannot have its cake and eat it too, at least not without serious implications.

Israelis at a Jerusalem Day march in Jerusalem last month. (Ariel Schalit/Associated Press)

Israeli politicians saying the occupation "is bad" but further entrenching it in their actions does not give me much hope. Our "burden of day-to-day life [and] freedom of movement and occupation" is not, or should not be, the issue if this occupation were respecting the laws of occupation. The issue is much deeper: Our freedom, independence, statehood and return of refugees are at stake. Easing my day-to-day life is welcomed, but it is not a favor that Israel offers. It is the law and obligation of the military occupier, Israel.

You suggest "joint task forces made up of both Palestinians and Israelis." We did that for two decades: It was called Oslo and fell flat on its face, multiple times. I have many stories of how these joint committees were used to entrench the occupation in ways most Israelis would be shocked to learn.

Indeed, we have internal Palestinian challenges — surprise, surprise. After seven decades of Israel forcefully fragmenting our geography, battering our society, strangulating our economy, murdering and jailing our leaders, what would you expect? Hamas is the new player on the block; what about the decades before Hamas? Israel always makes sure there is a monster on the other side. How else do right-wing governments rally the masses — think of Bush Jr., and Trump? Regarding domestic challenges, remember I am American too, so I have such challenges on both sides of my hyphenated identity.

My friend, we made all the concessions we can make, maybe too many. I wrote on this in a piece titled "Palestinians are done conceding."

Time, as Martin Luther King Jr. once said in a talk, is neutral. It is what we do with time that is meaningful. Since we will not be disappearing anytime soon, we have no option but to remain in struggle — hopefully a smarter struggle every passing year — until our rights are gained.

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Thank you for the links to the party platforms. I stand corrected, though the Labor platform, for example, is for the 21st Knesset and today's is the 24th. Nevertheless, did you notice how a Palestinian state is conditioned to a broader regional peace, and the subsequent text negates all the talk of accepting two states when it says: "In order to ensure the existence and security of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state with a clear Jewish majority, we must return to the essence of the Zionist vision: a Jewish state in the Land of Israel, in the heart of the Middle East, after two thousand years of exile." See how, in the second half of the sentence, it references the "Land of Israel," i.e., from the river to the sea, not the "State of Israel," which is the recognized member state at the U.N.? This makes me ask: Will the real Israel please stand up? Can you imagine if every tribe from 2,000 years ago decided to pick up and go "home" today? I expect not. Much more than an email exchange will be required to hash this one out.

Regarding past Israeli "real offers for peace" at Camp David in 2000 or otherwise: I agree it will take much more debate to make the case, either way, but I was not there and base a lot of my understanding on the writings of people who were in the room, including the Israeli foreign minister at the time, Shlomo Ben-Ami, and the U.S.'s Robert Malley, all of whom stated that there was nothing on the table to sign. Oh well, history will inform us all, but for us, this was an attempt that failed, and anyone thinking that negotiating positions are starting points for future negotiations is very misled.

If Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by a Jewish extremist for his support of peace that encompassed national self-determination for Palestinians, what will be the fate of the Israeli de Klerk who decides to end the occupation once and for all? Maybe it is us Palestinians who don't really have a negotiating partner. Scary.

Nadav, reflecting on your emails thus far I have a gut feeling that we agree on more than we disagree on, but may I use this opportunity to confirm that? Am I correct to assume: (1) you accept a rules-based world order, (2) you acknowledge that Israel is undertaking a military occupation in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza Strip, and (3) all parties to the conflict should be held accountable in all the legal venues available for that purpose?

Best,

Sam

Dear Sam,

I suddenly remembered this small story by the late Yehuda Amichai, a true lover of Jerusalem and all its people. "Once I sat on the steps by a gate at David's Tower. I placed my two heavy baskets at my side. A group of tourists was standing around their guide and I became their target marker. 'You see that man with the baskets? Just right of his head there's an arch from the Roman period. Just right of his head.' 'But he's moving, he's moving!' I said to myself: 'redemption will come only if their guide tells them, "You see that arch from the Roman period? It's not important: but next to it, left down and a bit, there sits a man who's bought fruit and vegetables for his family." ' "

I read your email and felt your frustration and resolve. I am a journalist. I do not represent Israel or the IDF, and definitely not PM Netanyahu. I do not presume you to represent the Palestinian leadership. You write, "we have no option but to remain in struggle — hopefully a smarter struggle every passing year — until our rights are gained." Well, my friend, what do you need me for?

I do not expect you to become a Zionist, and I will never be a big fan of the Palestinian national movement. I do not agree with all of your factual representations of the past and present, and I guess the feeling is mutual. What I can do is try to understand, humbly, where you come from — and present angles I am familiar with.

Here's one: A majority of Israelis will respond to your remarks on the occupation by stating that the problem is the deep commitment of Palestinian organizations to violence, insisting that this course of action forces Israel to take tougher measures in an attempt to protect its citizens. They will mention Jewish families murdered in their sleep, Hamas proudly shooting into dense civilian areas and vowing (as Mahmoud Zahar did just last week) to never recognize Israel. Many Israelis will point out that the Palestinian Authority (supported by the U.S. and recognized by Israel) pays hefty salaries or pensions to Palestinian terrorists convicted of murdering Israelis, civilians and military alike, and that this is a constant encouragement to violence.

LEFT: A firefighter after Hamas rockets struck the Israeli city of Holon. (Ahmad Gharabli/AFP/Getty Images) RIGHT: Israelis take cover under a bridge in Tel Aviv as rockets from the Gaza Strip hit the city. (Gil Cohen-Magen/AFP/Getty Images)

The deal, most Israelis will say, was supposed to be pretty clear: We'll begin dismantling the occupation, and Palestinians will end these cycles of violence. What we got, before and after Rabin was murdered, is Hamas's suicide bombings and double speech from Fatah regarding armed struggle. Sam, why did Hamas embark upon its most murderous rampage, systemically blowing up buses and pizza parlors, the same year when Israel was most committed to peace? Why did these attacks happen right when hope was at its peak and the occupation showed signs of flatlining — to the extent that you, a talented and successful American, took your family back to Palestine?

We both know the answer, I think, and it was stated by Hamas. While Israel had its extremists trying to ruin the Oslo accords — including the Jewish murderer who committed the massacre in Hebron — it was clear that things were changing rapidly for the better. Hamas wanted to prevent any compromise by moderates on both sides from coming to fruition. And no, Hamas is not "new." Hamas is an important power that has been trying to sink the boat from the outset.

A couple of weeks ago, during a siren while rockets were fired toward Israel, we ran with our children and closed the fortified door of the room shelter. I explained to them what was happening — and also that the IDF is bombing Hamas targets in Gaza.

"But the people in Gaza," said my daughter, "they do not have bomb shelters."

"They don't," I replied, "and imagine how they must be feeling right now."

I could have told her, all factually true and contextually accurate, the following: There are hundreds of kilometers of underground tunnels and bunkers in Gaza, according to Hamas's so-called prime minister. Hamas uses those for its military activity while at the same time launching missiles from civilian areas. And while Israeli restrictions on movement and access of goods and people in and out Gaza are — in the mind of many in the Israeli security apparatus (and myself, btw) — heavy-handed and foolish, they are a result of Hamas performing a military coup there and not meeting the obligations toward Israel agreed to in the Oslo accords.

Sixteen years ago, a Likud government evacuated all settlements in Gaza, forcibly removing their Jewish inhabitants, then withdrew all ground IDF forces to the 1967 line. It did so unilaterally, without a Palestinian commitment of any kind. I was there as a journalist: In a matter of 10 days all settlers were forced to leave, and their neighborhoods were flattened by Israeli bulldozers. I remember my Palestinian friends saying: *It's a trick by Sharon, it will never happen*. Well, it did. And I could have told my daughter that had we stayed in the Gaza Strip, it is probable that Hamas would never have been able to amass the rocket arsenal and terror infrastructure it commands today.

After such a conversation, I doubt my daughter would believe that ending Israeli control of the West Bank is a great idea.

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But all I said is, “They don’t.” It’s not that I am hiding the facts. It’s that, to quote Yehuda Amichai again, “From the place where we are right / Flowers will never grow.” She is a child, and our way out of this is not to reiterate our historical justifications. The way out isn’t to turn a political problem to a legal issue, as you did in your previous email. Our way out, I think, begins with seeing the other side and an honest effort at empathy.

It has occurred to me in these emails that I have the privilege of speaking with a founding-father figure, as you, Sam, might be remembered in the state of Palestine. A man who returned after Oslo and helped build the first telecommunications company, the first mall. I had the privilege of hours with the late Shimon Peres, one of our founding fathers. I remember him quoting a phrase from Prime Minister Levi Eshkol. Eshkol used to say: “I compromise and compromise, until I get what I want.” I think this motto is one explanation why Israel has prospered. What is your motto?

As to your questions: The landscape of world politics is not based on rules, but on interests and power, and conflicts are not solved in tribunals but by agreements (or the complete defeat of one side, like in East Timor, Syria ... etc.). If you are asking me if Israel should adhere to international law as to military occupation, I would say of course, and the IDF insists that it does. However, for dozens of years, the expression “the occupation corrupts” has been a consensus within the Israeli left and maybe center. I think it contributed much to the understanding that this condition is not sustainable and dangerous to Israelis themselves.

So let me ask you, looking forward: If Israel elected a new prime minister, and she/he makes a real and viable offer largely along the lines of the 2003 Geneva Accord — the formation of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 lines with equal (1:1) land swaps, including the removal of all settlements left on the Palestinian side; a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem with special arrangements in the holy areas; a just and agreed solution for Palestinian refugees and their descendants with an option to live in the new state of Palestine (but not Israel); and security arrangements that meet the needs of both parties — will such an offer be accepted by the Palestinian leadership? Would you want it?

Best,

Nadav

Hi again, Nadav,

Before I jump into replying to your last email, I would like to ask you, as a journalist and someone aware of media coverage in Israel, what has the media focus in Israel been during these last 72 hours? I ask because there is an extremely dangerous escalation of Israeli actions over these last three days. A Palestinian from the al-Amari refugee camp, next to my house, was approached while sitting in his car in the Umm al-Sharayit area by a hit team of undercover Israeli forces and murdered in cold blood. Then, upon the arrival in Tel Aviv of U.S. Secretary of State Blinken, Israel launched a named security “operation” to round up (i.e., arrest) hundreds of Palestinian citizens of Israel. These are not Palestinians under military occupation, but Israeli citizens. Similarly, on the occupation side of this mess, the Israeli occupation forces are arresting Palestinians at an accelerated pace (the act of nighttime arrests is a decade-old practice, literally nightly). During the last two nights, several were arrested in my city of al-Bireh, as were others in Tulkarem and Bethlehem. As if all this were not enough, Israeli provocateurs, many settlers among them, I assume, entered the al-Aqsa Mosque compound, again. While this was happening, another legal case to expel Palestinians from their homes was being heard in Israeli courts, this time not regarding the neighborhood Sheikh Jarrah but in the neighborhood on the other side of the Old City, Silwan.

Are Israelis hearing of these developments post the cease-fire? Do they even care? Or are folks back to the good life in Tel Aviv, sipping their cappuccinos at beachfront cafes and totally blocking out that nothing has changed that got them to this dire point? Actually, change did happen, for the worse.

Your story by the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai is a telling one. I may recite it in my talks, giving you credit, of course. Yehuda was a wise man with this story. I could not agree with him more. There are some "target markers" in life that no amount of hasbara — Israeli propaganda — can erase. Today it is Hamas, yesterday it was Iran, before that Hezbollah, before that Arafat, before that the PLO, and on and on and on — all heavy baskets that come and go. But the "arches" that are not budging anytime soon are the notions of "right" and "wrong," not as we as individuals may define them, but how humanity collectively defined them after World War II. These arches have names: Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Court of Justice. If these "target markers" are not accepted as universal reference points, by individuals and states, then we are left to see who can develop the next best weapon of destruction and which side has the greater appetite for suffering.

For the future of my kids and yours, I refuse to ignore the rules-based world order, as unjust as it may be in certain cases, as in Palestine's.

To your last email. Wow, I feel I overburdened you with my frustration. That was not my intention. Sorry. Reflecting on what I shared with you to date, I am thinking to myself: Of course he is overwhelmed. This is an average Israeli professional, raising three kids in the Tel Aviv area. Yes, he is a journalist, but like most professional journalists he is not necessarily wedded to the stories he covers, and that's assuming you are covering the conflict per se. Of course, neither you nor I am representative of anyone but ourselves. So, are we just chatting as an intellectual exercise, like how we may chat about the last soccer match in the context of the teams' historic performances? I think not.

As active citizens of this world who believe in democracy, I would assume we would agree that our civil duty in democracy is more than showing up occasionally at a ballot box (in your case every few months and in my case every other decade or so :-). I have faced this dilemma many times: How to be a better professional vs. how much this conflict requires my involvement as a citizen. As noted, I relocated from Ohio to help establish the first independent Palestinian telecommunications company, only to quickly learn that the Israeli military occupation would not let that happen. The result is that I now spend a good 30 percent — my wife would claim 50+ percent :-) — of my time in civil society, writing and speaking to educate others. Education is the greatest weapon of mass construction I know of.

So, when I write, "we have no option but to remain in struggle — hopefully a smarter struggle every passing year — until our rights are gained," and you ask, "what do you need me for?" — well, the short answer is: a lot. That struggle I reference is both of ours, a struggle to free me and my people from what Israel has brought upon us, and a struggle to free you and your people from remaining an oppressor forever. We must do more than "try to understand"; we must act in the most effective ways possible, preferably jointly, even when the facts are at odds with our personal understandings.

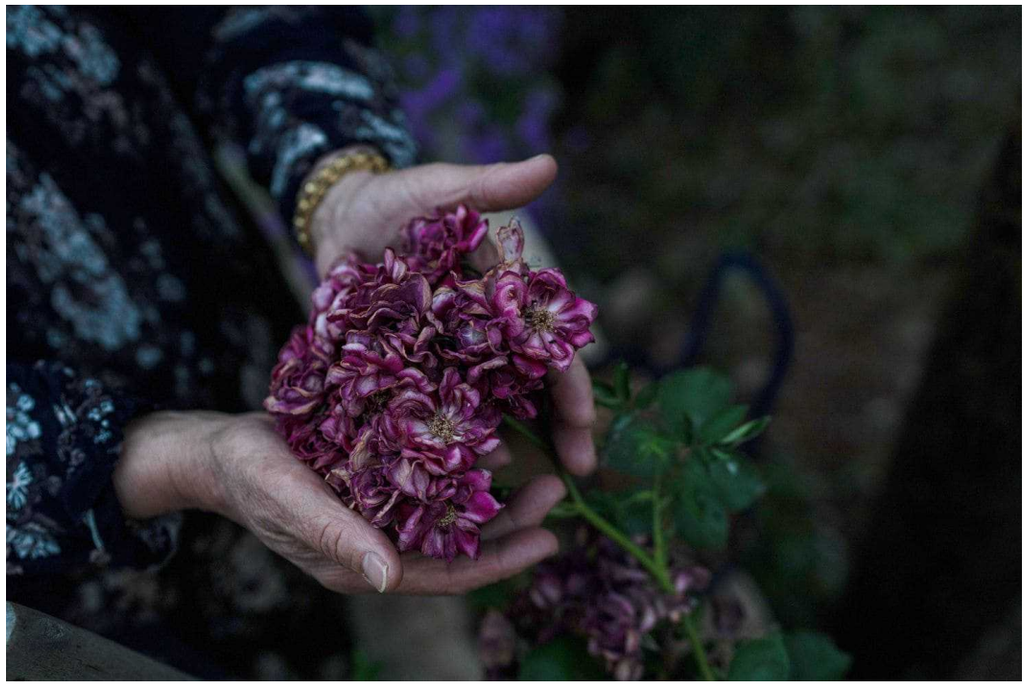
You, my friend, have the right to elect representatives to the Israeli Knesset that legislate on every meaningful aspect of my life under occupation. I do not, so I urge you to ensure that getting the Israeli boot of occupation off our necks is part and parcel of the agenda of those whom you vote for. You already completed your military service, but you can act to make sure your kids will not have to do the same.

I know I am pushing on an open door here. As a liberal Israeli, I know you care about this, and as a writer and public figure, I see you do not hesitate to make that public. But my fear is about the liberal part of Israel, not the Trump-loving right, like your current prime minister. I fear that the caring reaches a point, then it is blocked, either by current events, history, deep-seated fear, indoctrination or any other of the dozens of issues that blur our vision daily.

I recently spoke with a group of Jewish Americans over a Zoom call during a talk they invited me to give regarding the fallout of the latest outbreak of violence. By way of introduction, the moderator asked for all to say one word/thought to express their feeling. The answers were: anger, anxiety, fear, disgust, overwhelming and the like. When my turn came, I said, "in struggle," and I explained: We — those of us who celebrate civil rights in America — own, like it or not, all at once, Malcolm X, the Black Panthers and Martin Luther King. Not that we condone the methods of all, but they collectively represent a struggle of positive change. The same may be said of the Free South Africa Movement. Today, the Palestinian quest for freedom and independence is going through another violent chapter, but it is only a chapter, and the violent ones have been the shortest of all chapters in this long book. Sadly, only those short chapters are the ones that get the powers that be to act. A cynical reality of today's world order.

The examples you note from the viewpoint of the "majority of Israelis" are so telling. I cannot start to explain to you the number of times I've heard these exact same framings.

"[O]n the occupation by stating that the problem is the deep commitment of Palestinian organizations to violence." But this conflates the action with the reaction. Fifty-four years of military occupation is wrong, and Hamas is only 34 years old, so it was wrong for a long time before Hamas even appeared. And this is no normal military occupation; it is one where the other side refuses to even recognize it as an occupation and structurally deals with the occupied territory as an extension of its own. This is no longer an opinion; it is a well-documented fact and one reason, I assume, B'Tselem and Human Rights Watch have finally spoken out publicly louder than ever before. As for how Palestinians resist this occupation, it should surely be discussed, especially after how Israel dealt with the decades of nonviolent resistance, but to cry orphan after killing your parents, as is said, is ludicrous.



Umm Mohammed holds flowers that are dying after being subjected to tear gas fired by Israeli forces at the Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem, West Bank, in May. (Samar Hazboun/Getty Images)

Smoke rises from a storage tank after it is hit by rocket fire in Ashkelon, Israel, north of the Gaza Strip, in May. (Satellite image ©2021 Maxar Tech/AFP/Getty Images)

"[Hamas] vowing (as Mahmoud Zahar did just last week) to never recognize Israel." As usual, the average Israeli misses the context, which is expected given the level of state indoctrination they are exposed to. Since when is a single nonstate party being asked to recognize anything? Are we to counter that by demanding that the violent and Jewish fanatical "hilltop youth" must recognize Palestine before progress can be made? An absurd assumption, but one that Netanyahu and company thrive on. It's a message that neatly fits into a tweet. Reality is harder to accept. As previously noted, the PLO formally recognized the state of Israel. How many Israelis are aware of this? Looking at the stance of the "political agency" is what matters, as any freshman international law student can testify.

"Many Israelis will point out that the Palestinian Authority … pays hefty salaries or pensions to prisoners convicted of murdering Israelis, civilians and military alike, and that this is a constant encouragement to violence." Another great sound bite, especially when called "Pay to Slay," but absent of any context. A starting point to understand this issue may be found here, on the PLO's official Negotiation Affairs Department's site. Using the logic of those who take comfort in these

misleading slogans, I guess Palestinians would be validated if we demanded that the Israeli pilots who just murdered 67 Palestinian children in Gaza stop receiving their state salaries and pensions! If hasbara slogans carried the day, Israel would have won this conflict long ago. Thank God facts exist and matter, at least in some places.

I agree with you: Hamas — actually many more than just Hamas — adopts violence. They would need to be asked directly why and how they think this will get our rights back. I do not agree with this approach. But I would ask your question differently: With decades of nonviolence, why did the situation not get better or get resolved, instead getting worse by the day?

I appreciate how you explained this latest episode to your daughter. I did the exact same while huddled with the entire family in a room furthest from the settlement of Psagot, which was firing at our house in 2002, as Israeli helicopters were firing on Ramallah from above. I told my girls it was Sharon driving the helicopter, as I did not want to place in their minds that every Israeli was behind the controls, although I knew and know that the majority of Israelis are complicit, with their actions or their silence.

In educating your children, I do hope you explain the overall context. That Palestinians were sitting in their homes and farming their fields when in 1948 this Catastrophe (Nakba) fell upon them. Please make sure they hear the word and concept of Nakba from you, because as you know the Knesset made it illegal by law for Israeli schools to teach it. I want them to see us living together; make sure they read "Lives in Common: Arabs and Jews in Jerusalem, Jaffa and Hebron" by Israeli professor Menachem Klein. If your kids grow up to want to dig deeper, there is so much more by Jewish and Israeli writers to read and understand. Listening to oral histories for my own book, "Homeland," I heard firsthand from many Palestinian elders about a past of coexisting peacefully and a desire to do so again.

Readings aside, we cannot let our kids hate each other; not for Palestine or Israel's sake, but for humanity's sake.

I'd revise Yehuda Amichai's quote to read, "From the place where it is right / Flowers will never stop growing."

To be exact, Israel did not evacuate "all settlements in Gaza"; it did exactly what the IDF called it: It made a "unilateral disengagement" from Gaza. In other words, it removed its illegal settlers from the middle of Gaza to surround and seal Gaza and its 2 million into an open-air prison, sparking the need for tunnels to survive and, as was expected, for black market and arms trade too. Also, it was done in a "unilateral" manner, which gave Hamas the prize it was waiting for, a claim of victory in Gaza.

Former Israeli prime minister Levi Eshkol's quote is another I'd modify — to read, "I compromise and compromise, until if I compromise any further, I stop existing." Palestinians have no more to give to accommodate the state of Israel or the crimes of Europeans. Now, Israel must act, or lose even that which has been compromised.

You ask, "What is your motto?" Simply three words from our intellectual Professor Edward Said: "Equality or nothing."

You ask if I'd accept the terms in the Geneva Accord, or the like. I was reminded of the words once told to me by a friend here in Ramallah. He said, "I accept all plans, accords, configurations and the like." And when I asked how that can be, he answered, "Because I'm convinced Israel will not allow any of them to see the light of day." My answer is more hopeful — I shared with you my ultimate political model, Confederation — but in the meantime, like tomorrow morning, I seek progress, and that's where you and I have to focus: positive forward progress as defined by the norms of this imperfect world where we live. The IDF's "mowing the lawn" in Gaza every few years is not part of that paradigm.

OMG, I just noticed the word count. This is not fair. I'm sitting here on my day off, while you are juggling three kids this weekend. I'll stop here. We have one more exchange to go, and I'm sure we will have solved this conflict and maybe even started on the Cyprus one before we are finished.

I know you are entering your weekend, so Shabbat shalom.

Best,

Sam

Dear Sam,

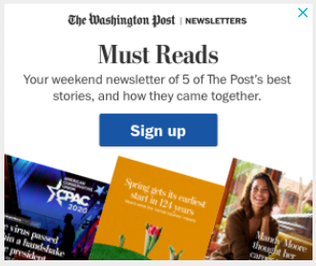
I managed to read your email while juggling three kids who demanded I play soccer with them the whole weekend (I didn't). You got me really laughing twice: at your remark about Israeli elections being held every few months while in the PA they take place once in a decade or so, and your suggestion that we move on to solve the Cyprus conflict. Do you think The Washington Post and Jeff Bezos will be able to finance all these pages?

I am sorry for being so late with my reply, but I am writing this during what might be a watershed moment in Israeli politics: the actual possibility Netanyahu will leave office after some 12 years in power. We may have a government coalition that disproves almost everything people might think about contemporary Israeli society: It would be composed of fervent supporters of Palestinian rights, devotees of the settlements, some centrists and, how can we forget, Raam, the party that could be described as the local outlet of the Muslim Brotherhood. If Israel establishes this government, it will be the first coalition to include a non-Zionist Arab party since that of the late Yitzhak Rabin. And this comes three weeks after the country saw the severest internecine violence between Arabs and Jews. This is the nature of democracies and their tendency to surprise you. Let's wait and see that Bibi does not pull a new trick out of his sleeve.

Now, I apologize for my reporter impoliteness, but allow me to press you on my question. If a peace agreement styled on the Geneva Accord would be set forth by Israel that would respond to all points brought forth by the Palestinians — an agreement that former PA officials already ceremonially signed with Israelis (I was there, by the way) — would this be accepted by Palestinians today? I am asking for your expert opinion. It's a crucial question for the liberal camp in Israel — the one you say you are worried about becoming too passive. If the most extensive compromise could be made (as far as the Israeli Zionist left is concerned), would there be a chance to end the conflict?

Because if most Palestinians would not, then liberals in Israel are fighting for something that isn't viable, and this would have repercussions for all of Israeli society and the possible victory of our hard-liners. Sam, the diminished power of (mostly secular) liberals in Israel can easily be traced to the second intifada, after the failed Camp David summit — and the consequent rise of Hamas as the ruler of Gaza.

You asked about what Israelis know regarding what's happening right now. A wave of arrests within Israel and the Silwan issue are all widely reported in Hebrew, of course. As to the Temple Mount, Jews have a legal right to visit the place (although most Orthodox Jews hold the view that it is forbidden because of its sanctity), just as Muslims can visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Do I visit? No.



Israeli media groups employ reporters who deal extensively with East Jerusalem and the West Bank. They speak Arabic and are sometimes Palestinian themselves. As in most democracies, the Israeli media is accused of being left-wing and biased, while Israeli intellectuals argue that it is too militaristic. Similar attitudes emerge regarding the U.S. media during its own conflicts. Unfortunately, I have colleagues who required security detail as a result of far-right threats made against them during the last conflict. When a police officer shoots a rubber bullet at a Palestinian girl in Sheikh Jarrah in what appears to be a brutal and illegal act, it was everywhere, from my Twitter feed to Ynet and TV. The reporter who broke that story is Suleiman Maswadeh, a Palestinian from East Jerusalem and a star on Israel's public TV. At any rate, no, our coverage is not enough — and yes, in conflicts, local media tends to look at things from a local viewpoint.

Do not worry about overburdening me with your emails. In this conversation, my friend, I will not label you as a cliche of the BDS NGO crowd in Ramallah, and please don't label me with the cliche of "an average Israeli professional." You and I come to the table with our own experiences. As a journalist, I've covered terrorist attacks and fatalities in our region and abroad; I've written stories while Hezbollah rockets landed overhead; several prime ministers have shouted at me when they didn't like my questions. Generals have ordered that I don't step foot on their bases. I've gotten stoned and tear-gassed everywhere from the Shuhada Street in Hebron to central Athens, and, most relevant to our conversation, I've spent time in the West Bank (and you did in Israel).

Reading your email, I sensed something familiar that I could not exactly put my finger on. It's like I've heard those descriptions before, about detached Tel Aviv life ("sipping their cappuccinos at beachfront cafes"), about those who know nothing of our reality in the region and all its evils. And I sense an evasion of the practical steps to be taken (and forgive me if I misunderstood you on that).

It dawned on me that some of your answers are parallel to those I hear from right-wing Israelis who argue about a possible peace agreement. You Tel Aviv people, they say, you know nothing; come with us to the hills of Judea or the bombarded villages on the border of Gaza, and you'll see that you are merely fantasizing about an agreement when there is no partner for peace. You write: "Now, Israel must act, or lose even that which has been compromised." They say: The Palestinians must accept what we will offer, or they risk losing everything. How do we move forward from here, if we keep focusing, to borrow Amichai's metaphor, on the Roman arches?

I cannot leave your remarks about paying salaries to Palestinians convicted of murder unanswered. If you equate Israel's military pensions to paying the suicide bombers of Islamic Jihad, you are saying that the PLO promotes and pays for violence aimed intentionally at civilians. As to Israeli pilots — I completely reject the comparison you made between suicide bombers and IDF soldiers, and emphasize the moral and practical importance of intent. Let me be even clearer: Hamas launched a surprise missile attack on Israel, and on its capital. Israel responded, as any other country would. The moral fault for an attack such as this lies with the aggressor who opened fire. My position here is slightly more moderate than what Palestinian officials are saying to their counterparts in Israel, asking that Hamas be defeated as powerfully as possible.

“But the people in Gaza,” said my daughter, “they do not have bomb shelters.” “They don’t,” I replied, “and imagine how they must be feeling right now.”

— Nadav Eyal

I do teach my children about the Palestinian perception of what happened in 1948, and I’m familiar with the works written on it from Klein to Morris. However, I am still sure our region would have been a better place if Palestinians would have agreed to the 1947 partition. We can argue about this for years until the world will tell us both to go to hell. And then what?

We desperately need an intricate discussion that goes beyond shallow slogans. Let’s look at where we are now.

Zionism is a successful grass-roots phenomenon, not a superficial colonialist project. You wrote something in the last mail about paying the price for European crimes, and in a previous email you trivialized the desire of Jews to return to Eretz Yisrael and their right for a country of their own (“Can you imagine if every tribe from 2,000 years ago decided to pick up and go”). Yet “the state will not be given to the Jewish people on a silver platter,” said Chaim Weizmann in December 1947, arguing that the partition plan only gives Jews a chance for independence, and nothing more. Israel was already an established state in waiting in the years before the Holocaust. Its rise is not a result of global intervention but rather the actions of its founders.

The PLO was also successful, transforming from a pariah terrorist organization hijacking airplanes to an internationally recognized representative of the Palestinian people in just three decades. The PLO oversees the autonomous rule that does exist in the West Bank and has gained recognition of the right for Palestinian statehood by everyone, including Israeli prime ministers. The PA, with all its problems, has built institutions of a state, or a state in waiting, and has done so under very challenging conditions, with security mechanisms that cooperate closely with Israel and the U.S.

Now these two players are threatened from within. Hamas seeks to destroy the vision of a Palestinian liberal society, pushing the discourse into a binary, uncompromising approach. It wants Ramallah to be Gaza, ruled as a theocracy. In Israel, there are dangerous trends that threaten our democracy and liberal values. There is a rise in messianic movements within our local politics, and the continuous conflict and occupation damages the fabric of our society from within.

Extremists on both sides dream of an epic moment of violence after which a final victor will emerge. I know, and I think you do too, that there will be no victors after it.

Hence “the fierce urgency of now,” to quote Martin Luther King. You mentioned my book, “Revolt,” earlier (I think it will get to you next week). I have been lucky enough to see it published in more than a dozen countries, perhaps because it suggests a holistic account of the global mess that we have seen develop in the last two decades. But I’ll tell you what it is really about: how moderates screwed up.

I spoke with coal miners in Pennsylvania before, during and after Trump was elected. I describe my coverage of Mumbai during what Indians describe as their own 9/11, detailing the interactions between terrorists and their handlers in Pakistan, and recount my conversations with young Syrians walking in green fields in Hungary, looking for "victory," as a 17-year-old girl, Lilan, told me. When I asked her what she means by victory, she said: "Syria, freedom, victory, staying, food, water, shower, study, everything like this. It's really simple. But we need it. ... I want everything. Everything."

And I met with Marine Le Pen, with British nationalists, with German neo-Nazis who propose a truce with "the Jews" so they can "take care of the Muslims."

The father of the Greek far right, Konstantinos Plevris, explained to me why he hates Jews, but then added, "I believe that they are an inferior race, of course." Who, I asked? "The Arab," he said, and asked me: "Do you believe we are all equal?"

I do, I said.

It's like with dogs, he replied. There are dogs for hunting and dogs for leisure.

These are the people you and I and all those who have humanistic values are now faced with. The mainstream screwed up by assuming that maintaining the status quo is progress. Progress, actually, really demands struggle to sustain itself. That is the quote opening my book, by Frederick Douglass: "If there is no struggle, there is no progress."

You clarified what you meant by struggle. Indeed, if your struggle is for peace, we are brothers in arms. Peace is not a popular concept among certain crowds, who instead speak only of justice. They should know that one man's justice is another man's pain. Justice is an absolute, and peace is a condition. Justice demands everything and peace demands the minimal — for people to coexist with dignity and not kill each other. Justice is a never-ending quest. Peace is practical, evolving. But peace and justice are not diametrical: Without most people feeling, most of the time, that the peace they have is just, it cannot survive.

Now, may I suggest we dedicate our last emails to principles we agree upon, and/or five actions that can be done realistically now to better the situation? And maybe we will keep it really short, or risk the possibility this will only be read by interns in D.C. think tanks ...

Best, N.

Nadav,

From one father to another, may I suggest that you spend as much time with your kids as possible? Before you know it, they will be off on their own, and these days never return. When I look back, I regret not spending more time with my daughters as they were growing up; I was too busy liberating Palestine so they would find a free country to live in when they became adults. Today, they both look back from Cambridge, Mass., to see Gaza bombed back 100 years, Jerusalem boiling and settlers running rampant throughout the West Bank. I know they are facing the dilemma of their lives about returning home or advancing their education and careers abroad, but I also know Palestine lives in Palestinians, so they will never be far from home.

I fully understand your preoccupation with the new Israeli government in the works. We are all following events closely; our lives may depend on the outcome. A new prime minister, who is a settler leader, someone who vows to keep building settlements in the West Bank and is gung-ho about restarting the assault on Gaza, seems like not much to be hopeful for. Even if Bibi the magician can save himself from himself, Israel is in dire danger.

Democracies surprise us all, indeed. If democracies keep producing the likes of Trump, Netanyahu and Naftali Bennett, I fear for humanity. Far too many democracies in history produced monsters and human calamities while citizens blindly followed orders, and everyone was just going about their business. Think the U.S. in Iraq and dozens of places around the world.

No apology is needed for asking any question. I followed the Geneva Accord closely and have read the document in detail. It offers some valuable insights as an unofficial attempt to reach an understanding, but, as you know, it was not completed and is now relegated to failed efforts. As noted, past negotiating ending points no longer suffice as new negotiation starting points. These were lost opportunities, and they were lost for a reason that we can discuss one day in person. Today, any negotiations will only be accepted by Palestinians if grounded in a rights-based approach (i.e., international law). What does that mean? The short answer is we will not accept any illegalities that Israel created over time to be assumed accepted, such as denying our refugees the right to come home or the building of settlements.

So, my worry about the liberal camp is justified. If this camp remains embedded in the political ideology of Zionism, there is little hope that they will be part of the solution, not for us here in Palestine nor for Israel itself. I know a revolutionary change must happen in Israel, just as happened in South Africa, where, there too, the notion of supremacy was held on to until the very last moments before apartheid came tumbling down. That identification of Israel as a "regime of Jewish supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea" is what caught my attention in the recent report from the largest Israeli human rights organization, B'Tselem. Of course, we who are living under Israeli military rule did not need a report to inform us of this.

Zakaria Hamad, foreground, looks out a window in his home, which was destroyed by an Israeli airstrike in Beit Hanoun in the Gaza Strip in late May. (Emad Nassar for The Washington Post)

I agree with you that we can trace the diminished role of Israel's liberal camp to the second intifada. Although I saw that second intifada as a mistake, as I will see any engagement that believes violence will advance us to freedom, the second intifada in 2000 was surely not around when that "liberal camp," represented by Israel's Labor Party, launched the settlement enterprise from 1967-77. The demise of the "left" in Israel is in its definition, not in reaction to what Palestinians do or say.

The rise of Hamas came not because of the failure of the Camp David summit, per se; it came as a result of Israel facilitating Hamas's growth from the mid-1980s to challenge the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Hamas assuming control of Gaza was more a function of a failed Fatah movement than popular conviction in support of Hamas. I'm not sure that still applies today.

Yes, I'm aware that Israeli media covers events here. Sadly, except for Palestinian journalists who are residents of East Jerusalem, Palestinian news agencies are prohibited from covering events in Israel. The entire media landscape here, on both sides of the Green Line, is worthy of a discussion on its own.

When I noted that you are “an average Israeli professional” I, in no way, shape or form, meant it as demeaning. I apologize if that was unclear. I was merely alluding to the fact that most Israelis visit the conflict as a sporting match, not a life-or-death issue that requires their immediate attention. I saw this in the last few Israeli elections, when oppression of Palestinians for 54 years was not even a topic of discussion. That noted, and with what I witnessed firsthand and have been advised by many Israelis, there are real differences in worldview between the Tel Aviv area and Jerusalem, for example. A topic for another day.

Regarding practical steps, no evasion here. I wrote up 101 practical steps (literally 101) that the Israeli side (the occupying power) can take tomorrow to lower tensions, not end the conflict (see “Israel’s mockery of security: 101 definitions of occupation”). They don’t take even five of them seriously. Why? Because there is no political acceptance of their role as an occupier, and they have no political intention of removing the boot of occupation from our necks. What would liberal Israel say about that? We move forward only by respecting the rule of law, not by comparing similar-sounding sound bites that have very different underlying intentions behind them.

You took issue with my reply regarding Palestinian prisoners. I know you are aware that hundreds of Palestinians are in Israeli prisons, and they have never been charged with anything — it’s called administrative detention. No judge, no jury, no evidence, no conviction, just plucked from his or her bed at 3 a.m. and placed in prison for six months at a time, renewable indefinitely. Of course, it is well documented that torture, in all its forms, is a mainstay of Israeli prisons. As for those convicted of violent acts, each case would need to be reviewed since the “convicting entity” is the same as the “occupying entity,” and its conviction rate is 99.74 percent. Lots more to say on this in due time, but trust me on this one. If I go to a Palestinian government office today and ask where I can sign up to undertake a violent act and get paid for it, I would be thrown in a Palestinian prison. Our social welfare system needs to be reformed, not politicized.

Regarding Israeli pilots who launch their high-tech, “precise” missiles of death and destruction on Gaza — destroying the civilian infrastructure there, undertaking wholesale killing — what matters of the “moral and practical importance of intent”? With that logic, the intent of low-tech unguided missiles being fired from Gaza is no more than a community at large who has the intent to scream out to the world that enough is enough. If one starts the story with who started the latest outbreak of violence (this time clearly provoked by Bibi), it is an insult to the intelligence of those Palestinians living (and dying) ever since Israel’s establishment.

Understanding the past, the factual part of the past, is of utmost importance to chart a path forward. If we fall into the fantasy that it’s all about a dual narrative and all are right, we will not have learned one iota from history. Some events in history are wrong, illegal, morally reprehensible. When we have a common understanding of these, we can seek restorative justice, since absolute justice makes for great bumper stickers but is not real.

I do not trivialize the connection Jews have to Palestine/Israel one bit. However, I do have an issue with anyone who thinks they can displace an indigenous people, set up a regime of Jewish supremacy that rules over people against their will and somehow get away with it.

Yes, this 2,000-year reference is not a monopoly Jews have on history. First, we all go back together or forward together. Why stop at 2,000 years? Let us go back 3,000, 4,000 or 10,000 years. We will reach a point where no case can be made for anyone, anywhere. In my view, political Zionism hijacked the great religion of Judaism. It’s time a correction is made.

I am anxiously awaiting your book because you are spot-on to view the global arena as where change must happen. Being liberal or moderate means nothing today if you do not uphold the values of a rules-based world order.

So much for keeping it really short. As this is my last email to you in this exchange, I hope we will stay in touch. If we proved anything here, I hope it is that we can disagree and still seek a better, joint future for Palestine and Israel, without killing each other along the way.

Be well and keep safe,

Sam

Dear Sam,

Let's just say my children made a legally binding declaration that editing the English version of my book will be the last time that I spend so much time on something that isn't them. And you know, families are a rules-based world, so I am inclined to concede.

I am more hopeful than you about this new Israeli government — not because it will advance the peace process, if such a thing even exists at this point. I am hopeful because it means change after 12 years of a leader committed to the status quo. No more, no less.

In these emails I've pushed toward the practical, and I was happy to see your helpful article about 101 actions Israel could take. I've read them all, and while on some we'll have disagreements, we can agree on many, many elements here — critical for Palestinian life and therefore for the region's stability and Israeli security. I will definitely use it in my work. My next question would be: How can it be made into a reality?

And this is why I am not going to answer your points one by one. (Well, sort of. Here's a quick summary: You keep downplaying the importance of Hamas and its popular support among its constituents; blaming Israel for Hamas is factually problematic and out of context when you observe the rise of fundamentalism in the region; you will not recognize the difference between trying not to hurt the innocent and handing out favors for killing civilians; you focus on rights instead of political solutions yet this is a dead end — for instance, what about the right of Jews to live in Hebron; you present the Palestinian Authority as a nonentity as though it's all about Israel, while it is commanding and crucial; and the Israeli Supreme Court and law forbid torture, and it's not a mainstay "in all its forms" or we would have the relevant lawyers go to court.)

What I want to do is to present where I believe we agree.

We agree on ruling out violence against innocent people, and that this conflict will not be solved by fundamentalist dreams about cleansing "the enemy." We are for a solution guaranteeing equal human rights to all people living between the river and the sea, while realizing national self-determination for the two peoples.

We agree that the choices that your daughters are faced with are impossible, and that for the good of the region, of their people, of people like me in Israel, and most important of themselves and your family, they should have the chance to prosper and have a good life in their homeland. I didn't write this earlier — your focus on education is admirable, and something that many Palestinians and Jews, I think, have in common. Ignorance, incitement, racism are enemies to us both. I totally agree about getting the facts right and discouraging relativism; and we need to distinguish, even looking back, between right and wrong. I just think this will take some time to agree about.

A lot to build on, I think.

You keep telling me how unbearable the situation is for Palestinians. I keep telling you it's also bad for Israelis and it is very much in Israel's best interest to find a solution. Here's the thing: In order to get it done, people who believe these ideas are the ones who need to hold the power.

After all, everybody knows how this will end. We might have thousands more dead, several rounds of violence, dozens of years wasted, only to return to the same template of an agreement we have seen on the negotiation table since the year 2000 (those peace plans, my friend, that Israel proposed and were rejected by both Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas). The way out is political; no international choruses of support and condemnation will help, I suspect.

Therefore, we should aim for negotiations that will end with an American bridging offer, one that will be almost impossible for both sides to reject. For this, there needs to be serious Israeli leadership and a unified Palestinian leadership committed to a final-status agreement. I'll play Cato the Elder once more and quote again what Palestinian leaders keep communicating to Israelis: If you want an agreement, Hamas needs to be defeated. It's very difficult to have a political solution with people who think they were ordained by God to destroy you.

There is hope in change. Let me remind you of some context: Israel has had peace with Egypt since 1979, after several bloody wars. Nobody believed that was possible. Some generals suspected President Sadat's plane landing in Israel was just a ploy and terrorists would emerge shooting machine guns. That was the level of suspicion. Israel has had peace with Jordan since 1994. In 2000 the IDF left south Lebanon and withdrew to the international border, and since 2006 there has been no major confrontation with Hezbollah. In the past year, Israel signed groundbreaking peace agreements with two Gulf countries, and thousands of both Jewish and Arab Israelis are spending weekends in Dubai. To get to this point, all Israeli villages and towns in the Sinai desert were dismantled for peace, and Israel evacuated all settlements in Gaza and withdrew the IDF from the area, as well as from two settlements in the north of the West Bank. Israel also has a central role in regional alliances, mostly devoted to blocking Iran.

What I'm saying is that, however complex, it's possible to get Israelis to support sea changes and challenging compromises.

I saw what you wrote about Zionism, and I think, as someone whose family has been Zionist for five generations, that you got it wrong. It's the dream of Zionism that the accomplishment of Jews is not only to build a national home in Israel, but also to have a society with equality to all the people of the land, regardless of race, religion or ethnicity, based on social and progressive cornerstones. Ze'ev Jabotinsky was the ideologue who gave birth to the Israeli right wing. Netanyahu's father was his confidant. This is how Jabotinsky saw it: "In every cabinet, in which a Jew will serve as prime minister, there will be an Arab deputy prime minister; and vice versa." It's the traditional form of Zionism that speaks of peace with almost religious fervor, arguing that it would be the real fulfillment of its vision: to live together with the people of the region. To envision congratulating your children they need not go to the army anymore. Israel is no Sparta but rather Athens, in constant conflict.

I am making this correction because it is of paramount importance and it also provides a source of hope. You'll say to me: Where are these ideals in day-to-day reality? Like many grand ideals, there are always those who corrupt them. Yet those Israelis who protest the misery and evil of the current situation usually (but not always) subscribe to the idea of a Jewish nation-state in its original and progressive form, one that does not include military control of the West Bank. I cannot and will not defend those who have abandoned notions of peace and equality, nor do I claim these ideals are implemented as they should be. But these disappointments do not excuse those who preach that all people should have national self-determination, but not the Jews. How is this not bigotry?

I am bringing in Amichai again. In the end, we are simply slow-moving pieces in the history of the Middle East, and I want to believe we are advancing, even if we can't see it yet, to a viable and just solution.

From a distance everything looks like a miracle

but up close even a miracle doesn't look like that.

Even someone who crossed the Red Sea when it split

saw only the sweating back

of the man in front of him

and the swaying of his big thighs,

or at best, in a hasty glance to one side,

fish in a riot of colors inside the wall of water,

as in a marine observatory behind panels of glass.

— Yehuda Amichai, excerpt from "Miracles," translation by Robert Alter

Sam, I have learned so much from this exchange. I want to thank you for your patience and congratulate us both for civility. I will definitely be in touch.

Take care and be well,

Nadav

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