



PANELISTS DEBATE

Jim HOAGLAND, Contributing Editor to *The Washington Post*

It can be said of the Palestinian leadership that it is also in a state of crisis, with a President whose mandate has long expired. I do not want to get into that kind of exchange, but I do want to give Ambassador Rabinovich a chance to comment, particularly on the US role.

Itamar RABINOVICH, President of the Israel Institute, Distinguished Global Professor at New York University (NYU) and Distinguished Fellow at the Brookings Institution

First, Mr Hassassian referred to my Government as a fascist Government. I am not a supporter of this Government, but it is not a fascist Government, so let us eliminate name calling from this discussion. Second, regarding the point about Hamas, the rise of Hamas is not a result of the failure of the peace process. Hamas is the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and we know that fundamentalist Islam is surging in the whole region. This is the particular manifestation in the Palestinian community, so it is not a welcome development, but it is part of the regional trend. We have to accept it as such.

That is to say, we have to bear in mind that even if Israel and Mahmoud Abbas reach an agreement, there will be a problem of implementation in Gaza. There may be a problem of trying to sabotage or derail the agreement by firing rockets from Gaza. That is a threat that we have to take into account. Thirdly, let us be concrete and specific, as we do not have too much time. I would like to know what is wrong with the Kerry proposals. If we want to move forward, let us hear what is missing or what should be abandoned in the Kerry proposals.

Fourth, the US role is diminished and the EU is a welcome supporter, but leadership is not given; it is taken. The European Union can put itself in the position that the United States has had for many years. This is as the only party that is acceptable to both, that can help mitigate an agreement and that can underwrite it. The fact is that the two peace agreements that we have with Egypt and Jordan have been finalised with the help of the United States. I have seen no substitute for that position to date.

Jim HOAGLAND, Contributing Editor to *The Washington Post*

One of the things that is missing, or one of the problems with the Kerry paper, if I understand your position correctly, is simply that there is a loss of faith in the United States. You do not accept the good faith of the United States as a negotiator, in which case there is no point in our continuing with that role.

Manuel HASSASSIAN, Ambassador from Palestine to the United Kingdom; former representative at the Ministry of Higher Education and at the Association of Arab Universities

That is not the issue. The Kerry paper still revolves around the same approach and methodology of incrementalism. Incrementalism has been a disaster and we have witnessed it in the Oslo Agreement. The Oslo agreement has brought us to where we are today. If we put the Palestinian and Israeli negotiation team on both sides in a big room, like in the Vatican, let them struggle inside until the white smoke comes we might then find a solution. It cannot be done on incrementalism and we have witnessed that. We have spent two decades with the United States as a shepherd. Going into details on this has led to extremism on both sides. When I talk about infusing religion into this conflict, it becomes much more dangerous and much more difficult to solve.

That is why our approach to the Kerry paper is a *non starter* approach. It has to change dramatically. Mr Netanyahu may be willing to stop settlements. When I refer to a fascist Government, I refer to what is being practised, and I am not talking about how ugly and repulsive occupation is. It means using all means of extra-judicial killings and demolitions and what have you. There is nothing I could find, with the bypassed roads and the ethnic cleansing that



we are witnessing in Palestine, to say that Israel is a democratic country. This is a gimmick and cannot be accepted. If Israel is a democratic entity, it is only a democratic entity for the Jews who live in Israel.

We do not want to generate a discussion on that. I am just trying to say this about this Government. If you do not like the word fascism, I would say that it is an extremely colonial type of Government that believes in a one-state solution, i.e. controlling the occupied territories. I too agree with you that a two-state solution is the only solution for our problem, but today, we are witnessing a two-state delusion. That delusion will prompt me to put all my efforts into having a one man, one vote, one state solution

Hamas is not a terrorist organisation and I refuse that. Hamas is an integral part of the Palestinian people. They are frustrated and I do agree that they do not recognise the state of Israel, but effectively they will by Time recognise the state of Israel per se. Israel has been dealing with the PLO and up to and since Arafat's death, we have seen nothing moving in this peace process. That is why the failure of this peace process prompted Hamas and other organisations to come forward as the alternative leadership to the PLO. This is where we feel that we have been disempowered in this negotiation process and have reached the stalemate that we have reached today.

Itamar RABINOVICH, President of the Israel Institute, Distinguished Global Professor at New York University (NYU) and Distinguished Fellow at the Brookings Institution

I will not fall into the trap of trying to refute the allegations or to start name calling with regard to Palestinian actions, because that is not the purpose of this meeting. I have one comment about Hamas. You said Hamas is not a terrorist organisation. Let me remind you what Hamas did to your own people when they captured Gaza. They threw your people off the roofs in Gaza. It is a terrorist organisation, not just with regard to us but also with regard to you.

Jim HOAGLAND, Contributing Editor to *The Washington Post*

Let me try to come at this from a slightly broader angle. Ambassador Rabinovich, you are probably Israel's most noted student of Syria and you participated in the negotiations with the Syrians. The world is arguing a lot today about what to do in Syria. We have some views, the Russians have some views. The voices that I do not hear talking about Syria are from the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Government. Why not? Is it a case of better the devil you know than the jihadi you do not know, or is it something else?

Itamar RABINOVICH, President of the Israel Institute, Distinguished Global Professor at New York University (NYU) and Distinguished Fellow at the Brookings Institution

There is a debate in Israel which is quite public about what is better for Israel, the devil you know or the devil you do not. The devil you know is Assad and company and the devil you do not know is the Islamic groups or the jihadis. Personally, I am more concerned with the axis of Tehran, Damascus and Hezbollah than I am with the opposition. You do not hear too many voices from Israel with regard to Syria, because our interference, physically or verbally, would be counterproductive.

It has been the policy and the argument of the Assad regime from day one that this is not a genuine domestic revolt. That is a conspiracy hatched from the outside, and if we added our voice to the choir, we would be playing into the regime's propaganda. While I am critical of certain policies of my Government, I think the policy conducted with regard to Syria during the past four and a half years has kept us out of the conflict. On the whole, it has been a wise and successful policy.

Jim HOAGLAND, Contributing Editor to *The Washington Post*

Ambassador, could you add your own interpretation of the Israeli attitude towards Syria, as well as the Palestinian attitude?



Manuel HASSASSIAN, Ambassador from Palestine to the United Kingdom; former representative at the Ministry of Higher Education and at the Association of Arab Universities

The Palestinians have learned long lessons. They were being forced all the time to be part of inter-Arab politics. The prices that we have paid as a result of inter-Arab politics have been detrimental to our national ethos and to our existence. That is why today, we the Palestinians and our leadership have taken a firm stand on the issues of not interfering in internal politics. However, we definitely are with the aspirations of the Syrian people, what they want to see and what kind of government they want to see.

We are definitely among those who push for democratisation, from building civil societies and for inculcating a peace culture. This is what we have witnessed in our practises during the first Oslo period. We thought that peacemaking was not enough to withstand and sustain the longevity of peace, unless that kind of peace is made people to people. It must emanate from the negotiating partners themselves, because we have to live eventually with the decisions of our negotiations. I believe that neither the United States nor the international community could impose solutions. Those solutions are a recipe for disaster. It has to come from our deep conviction about how to sustain peace and how to move forward.

I cannot exonerate Israel from being a root cause in the instability of the M.E. region. Israel is an occupying power and it has been a destabilising factor in the Middle East, which has led to such an instability. If you talk to scholars, historians or leaders, they tell you that today, the crux of the problem in the Middle East is the mother problem i.e. The Palestinian problem. The security of the state of Israel will be maintained and sustained for a long period of time if that conflict is resolved. The only way to resolve it is to come forward to the negotiating table.

That is why I like the title of Palestinian-Israeli dialogue. I am not here to debate him, because if I were to debate him, we would never finish. The blaming fingers cannot stop. I came here with the attitude of finding a solution from a wise diplomat from Israel. He could tell me exactly what the recipe is for successful negotiations, which I could deliver to my President. If we have shortcomings in this process, we are open to learn, because in the final analysis, both of us want peace. 70% of our societies want peace and we should not undermine that. We should be at the forefront, rather than be victims of radical groups on both sides who hijacked this peace process and brought it to a stalemate.

Jim HOAGLAND, Contributing Editor to *The Washington Post*

However, the Ambassador has already given you a proposal that you do not like, so we are stuck there.

Manuel HASSASSIAN, Ambassador from Palestine to the United Kingdom; former representative at the Ministry of Higher Education and at the Association of Arab Universities

I did not say I do not like it.

Jim HOAGLAND, Contributing Editor to *The Washington Post*

You did not accept it.

Manuel HASSASSIAN, Ambassador from Palestine to the United Kingdom; former representative at the Ministry of Higher Education and at the Association of Arab Universities

No, I did not say that I do not like it and I did not even comment on his proposal. I would like to see major amendments, because with this kind of proposal, you are just scratching the surface. We have to go deep into the six issues and we have to put them on the table. We cannot say, 'Let us start with this because this is easy. Let us start today, because this is easy.' You put all the issues forward, because they are organically intertwined, like Catholic marriage, with no divorce between partners. Either we have a package deal that ends the conflict or claims and move forward, or else it will be a recipe for disaster. We have seen this time and again, and you are repeating the same mistakes.



Jim HOAGLAND, Contributing Editor to *The Washington Post*

However, there is something a little out of sync here, and I go back to my opening. I very much respect the answer you gave about the involvement in inter-Arab politics and it was a lesson well learned. However today, the Palestinian-Israeli issue is not seen as the overriding question. The overriding question is the existential struggle between Saudi Arabia, with Sunnis and Iran, with the Shiites. How does that fit into this? We will wind this part of the programme up and move to the audience. How does that fit into the approach for Israel and Palestine to move forward?

Itamar RABINOVICH, President of the Israel Institute, Distinguished Global Professor at New York University (NYU) and Distinguished Fellow at the Brookings Institution

Let me make three brief comments. One is that I completely disagree with the statement that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is the root cause of the problem in the Middle East. When Islamic State people are massacring Yazidis in Iraq, it has nothing to do with the Israelis and Palestinians and so forth. Second, it is now fashionable to badmouth the Oslo accord. It had many problems and ultimately it was not successful, but it had two accomplishments. One is mutual recognition. We recognise the PLO as the official representative of Palestinian nationalism and they recognise the state of Israel. That is still there. The second thing is, we are not administrating the lives of Palestinians in the West Bank or in Gaza.

Thirdly, I would like to add an element to what I have discussed. The element is that of secret negotiations. Part of the problem with the Kerry effort and other efforts in the last two decades is that they have been public. I myself, when I negotiated with the Syrians, had both public and private negotiations. The public negotiation is a problem, because you are monitored all the time by the media and by public opinion. You are criticised and the pressures build up. You may or may not like the Oslo accord, but it was reached only because it was conducted secretly, away from everybody's attention in rustic Oslo. A condition of going back to the negotiating table should be a period of quiet, discreet negotiations. Without that, it is difficult to envisage success.

Jim HOAGLAND, Contributing Editor to *The Washington Post*

Thank you for your brevity. You have set the right mark and I hope you can match it.

Manuel HASSASSIAN, Ambassador from Palestine to the United Kingdom; former representative at the Ministry of Higher Education and at the Association of Arab Universities

I do not want to delve into the Arab politics as much, because my focus is on how we can move forward with this peace process. Today there is no peace, there is no process and there is no tunnel. We do not have all the semantics that we used to have with Meir anymore. I totally agree with you, Mr Ambassador that the question of being public in negotiations is something that was detrimental. That is why the Washington talks failed, and that is why the back channel, with all its shortcomings in Oslo, proved to be much more successful in at least kicking off something that is called real negotiations between the two parts.

There is the question of the objective conditions, including the external threats and internal contradictions within a democratic society like Israel when it has elections. The politics per se has changed leadership and changed perceptions and cognitions all along the line. On our side, as Palestinians, we have shifted from the vacillation between being statesmen, like Arafat at one time, and revolutionaries. We gave the wrong message to the Israelis, regarding whether we should be taken seriously or not.

You saw the end result in 2004. Arafat is gone and we have a new era. That new era is totally based on the non-military solution, a pragmatic approach, open dialogue and accepting negotiations through political accommodation. This is about coming to an agreement in ending this conflict. We have seen that, but we did not see the response from the other side. This means moving forward by empowering the underdog in this peace process to



come forward even more. The concession have always been by the underdog all along, with the pressures being put on by a third party like the United States of America. I am sorry to say that, Jim. I will stick to my guns when it comes to the US.

Jim HOAGLAND, Contributing Editor to *The Washington Post*

I appreciate your clarity.