

# Prospects for Peace In Southwest Asia

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I want to begin by thanking Helga Zepp-LaRouche, Lyndon LaRouche, and others in the LaRouche grouping for inviting me to be with and to speak with all of you at this conference.

I shall limit my discussion to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict. This conflict, of course, is only one of the conflicts in Southwest Asia-North Africa, the geographically correct term for the area that encompasses what is popularly designated as the Middle East. The world economic crisis, upon which this conference primarily focuses, may already be affecting, and in the near future will almost certainly affect in some ways, the topic of my discussion. Although in my remarks I shall discuss aspects of the political, cultural, and national character of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I realize, as I have already stated, that economic factors are important and that the present crisis may be one of the factors that will prevent the kind of economic aid to help people in need and to rebuild infrastructure, especially for those who have been and are being oppressed.

From another, related perspective, failure to resolve peacefully the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within a reasonably brief period of time could result in an expansion of conflict and war in the area, e.g., conflict between Israel and Iran, which in turn could threaten economically and militarily the rest of the world.

In yesterday's discussion, national sovereignty was addressed in a number of ways. National sovereignty is an important consideration for the Israeli-Palestinian



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*Professor Mezvinsky: The Obama Administration "has the potential to push Israelis and Palestinians to settle their conflict peacefully. The question is: Will it?"*

conflict. I shall in my remarks comment upon whether we should expect the Obama Administration to push Israeli Jews and Palestinians to settle their conflict peacefully. It should be clear that the United States government has the potential to do this. The question is: Will it?

## The Current Status

Let us first consider the present status of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

1. This conflict is worse today than it has been for the over 60 years of its existence. Since Sept. 28, 2000, when a clash occurred at the al-Aqsa Mosque area in Jerusalem, more people have been killed and wounded than were killed and wounded from the time Israel came into existence in 1948 to Sept. 28, 2000.

2. One and a half million Palestinians in Gaza and 2 million Palestinians in the West Bank are in terrible economic straits. Sixty percent of these Palestinians in Gaza are below the line of subsistence, measured at less than \$2 per person per day. Fifty-one percent are living in serious poverty. The unemployment rate is off the

chart. The statistics for West Bank Palestinians are not quite as bad, but are also extremely negative. If we knew nothing more than these two statistical items for any people anywhere in the world, we could readily conclude that trouble existed.

3. In the West Bank and Gaza, two political parties share political rule. Fatah, still headed by President Mahmoud Abbas, even though his term technically ended on Jan. 9, 2009, has surface control in the West Bank. Hamas, the party that won the election a couple years ago, controls Gaza and is also gaining strength in the West Bank. Hamas and Fatah have been and to a goodly extent still are antagonistic to one another, although representatives of each group are talking with one another and are considering a unity Palestinian government. Whether unity will soon occur is problematic. Hamas came to power largely because of its constructive, internal work and the internal corruption in Fatah.

The Feb. 10 Israeli election ended in a virtual tie between two parties, Kadima and Likud. Benjamin Netanyahu of Likud has been asked to put together a ruling coalition under his leadership as the next prime minister. This is a complicated process. How Netanyahu does it remains to be seen, but he will do it. The new Israeli government will be a rightist coalition. Netanyahu as the new, incoming prime minister has said that his top priority is not to negotiate with, but rather to destroy Hamas. He has also promised not to give back to Syria the Golan Heights. Not to give the Golan Heights back to Syria with agreed-upon water rights for both Israel and Syria will mean that no Israeli-Syrian peace treaty will be forthcoming. Not to negotiate with Hamas means that there will be no agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

4. After the Israeli incursion into Gaza a few weeks ago, and the massacre of Palestinians that occurred, antagonism towards one another by Palestinians and Israeli Jews is at an all-time high. Hamas leaders believe that Israel will continue to engage in an all-out war against Palestinians in order to destroy Palestinian nationalism. Hamas leaders believe the Israeli government wants to kill as many Palestinians, including women and children, as possible to achieve their goal. Already at least 1,360 Palestinians were killed by the Israeli Defense Forces during this latest incursion into Gaza, and thousands were wounded. The great majority of those killed and wounded were civilians; one-third were children. Much of the infrastructure in Gaza was



UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

*This UN Relief and Works Agency warehouse in Gaza was destroyed by Israeli bombing, January 2009. UNRWA provides relief and basic services to 1.1 million Palestinian refugees in Gaza.*

destroyed. On the other hand, altogether 15 Israeli Jews have been killed to date since the rocket launching by Palestinians began before the Israeli incursion.

5. Palestinians in the occupied West Bank are still consistently being oppressed by the Israeli government and Defense Forces (a bit later I shall specify some of this oppression).

6. The Zionist structure of the State of Israel guarantees, by law and in public policy, an exclusionist state for Jews that grants certain rights and privileges to Jews not granted to non-Jews, which include the 1.3 million Palestinian citizens of the State of Israel. These Palestinian citizens are clearly in a second-class status. Although better off in most ways than the 3.5 million Palestinian non-citizens in the West Bank and Gaza, the Palestinian citizens of Israel are antagonized by discrimination in the social, economic, and political arenas; they are also antagonized by the Israeli treatment of non-citizen Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

It is doubtful that representatives of the Israeli government and of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza will soon negotiate a peace settlement. (In respect for our young Jewish friend, who yesterday reacted against the usage of the terms “pessimism” or “pessimist,” I shall label my view a touch of realism; you can call me, if you wish, a realist.)

## President Obama’s Perspective

Can we expect that the United States government, i.e., the Obama Administration, backed by Congress, will use its powerful potential to influence or actually push the Israeli government and the Palestinians to negotiate a peaceful, relatively fair and equitable settlement, which the Arab governments in the Middle East will accept and support? My bottom-line answer at the present time is: Don’t count on it. Let me attempt to tell you why.

Barack Obama is a person of superior intelligence and is careful in his choice of words. He should be taken seriously in both what he says and does not say. What he said on Jan. 22,

when introducing George Mitchell as his special envoy for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is significant. Previously, during the Israeli incursion into Gaza, Obama—apart from a few platitudes—had said little. During his campaign for the Presidency, Obama did say and did repeat: “If missiles were falling where my two daughters sleep, I would do everything possible to stop that.” He was referring to Israeli children, not to the hundreds of Palestinian children being killed by the Israeli Defense Forces using arms obtained from the United States.

In his introduction of Mitchell as special envoy, President Obama avoided mentioning the attack on Gaza, which Israel had conveniently called off (at least for awhile) just before the inauguration. He emphasized a commitment to a peaceful settlement, but was vague except for one specific item. He maintained: “The Arab [League] peace initiative contains constructive elements that could help advance these efforts. Now is the time for Arab states to act on the initiative’s promise by supporting the Palestinian government under President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad, taking steps towards mobilizing relations with Israel, and by standing up to the extremism that threatens us all.”

Obama framed the Arab League proposal in a misleading fashion. The proposal does indeed call for the



normalization of relations within the context of a two-state settlement with a longstanding international consensus. This proposal has actually been blocked for over three decades by Israel and the United States.

The heart of this proposal is a call for a peaceful political settlement on terms that have been and still are well known and recognized internationally. Obama's Middle East advisors know this; Obama himself must know this. This proposal then calls for the creation of an independent, sovereign Palestinian state, encompassing the total areas of the West Bank and Gaza, which have been occupied by Israel since June 1967. Successive Israeli governments at most have said that Israel would consider an autonomous Palestinian state in those parts of the West Bank and Gaza from which Israel would retreat. Autonomy here means that Palestinians could, with imposed restrictions, rule themselves locally, but that, whenever the Israeli government decided that what was being done might be detrimental to Israel, the Israeli government would come in, enforce its rule, and stop whatever it wished to stop. In other words, Israel would retain sovereignty.

Successive United States governments have supported the Israeli approach to and definition of a possible Palestinian state. (It is, of course, not certain that Netanyahu as prime minister will even go this far in backing some type of Palestinian autonomous rule, a so-called state in some parts of the West Bank and Gaza.) It is abundantly clear that the Arab League and Israeli government definitions of a West Bank-Gaza Palestinian state are diametrically opposed to one another.

By both what he said and did not say in his talk, introducing Mitchell as special envoy, President Obama, in guarded and ambiguous language, indicated that he did not actually support the kind of Palestinian state envisaged by the Arab League proposal.

Israel's continual confiscation of land and resources, together with other daily acts of oppression in the occupied territories, all backed by the United States, undermine any real peace settlement. As recently as De-



*An Israeli settlement on the West Bank as seen from Jerusalem, July 2007. The settlements form a ring around the city, dividing it from the rest of the West Bank.*

cember 2008, moreover, Israel, the United States, and three Pacific island nations voted against a United Nations supporting "the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination." The resolution passed on a vote of 173 to 5.

Obama has said nothing of importance to date about the expansion of Jewish settlements and infrastructure developments in the West Bank and the other Israeli actions, designed to control Palestinians and to undermine the possibility of a two-state settlement. This stands as a stark refutation of his statement: "I will sustain an active commitment to seek two states living side by side in peace and security."

Obama, of course, has not mentioned Israel's use of United States arms in Gaza or the shipment from the United States of new arms to Israel during the ongoing military incursion into Gaza. That this is most likely in violation of both international and U.S. law, is known to the President's Middle East advisors. Obama, on the other hand, firmly opposed smuggling arms for Hamas into Gaza; he said this must cease. Obama endorsed the agreement of former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni that the Egypt-Gaza border should be closed to stop these shipments. The *Financial Times* editorialized: "As they [Rice and Livni] stood in Washington, congratulating each other, both officials seemed oblivious to the fact



GNUFDL

*The Israeli separation wall in Abu Dis, 2004. The wall is extending deeper and deeper into the occupied territory.*

that they were making a deal about an illegal trade on someone else's border—Egypt in this case.”

Obama continues to restrict his support to Fatah, the defeated political party in the January 2006 Palestinian election, the only free election in the Arab world, to which the United States and Israel reacted immediately and overtly by severely punishing Palestinians for electing the wrong people from the American and Israeli perspective. Obama's insistence that only Abbas and Fatah exist as partners for a settlement of some sort conforms to a too-often-expressed contempt for democracy unless the masters control it.

Obama has cited the usual reasons for ignoring the elected government, led by Hamas: “To be a genuine party to peace,” Obama stated, “the Quartet [United States, European Union, Russia, and United Nations] has made it clear that Hamas must meet clear conditions: recognize Israel's right to exist; renounce violence; and abide by past agreements.” Obama as usual did not mention that the United States and Israel reject all of these conditions. In their international isolation they bar a two-state settlement including a sovereign, Palestinian state; they do not renounce the use of violence; they reject the Quartet's proposal of the “Road Map.” Israel did formally accept what it regarded as the correct Road Map with 14 reservations to what was originally proposed. Those 14 reservations effectively removed the major substance and thrust from the original version. In his book *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, Jimmy Carter factually pointed this out. To date, Obama has referred to Hamas as a terrorist organization, dedicated to the destruction of Israel (or maybe all Jews). Obama has omitted mention of the facts that the United States and Israel are not only dedicated to opposition to any viable plan for a Palestinian state or to

one Democratic, secular state in Israel-Palestine, but are also implementing destructive policies. Obama has also avoided mentioning that Hamas, as opposed to Israel and the United States, has publicly, explicitly, and repeatedly called for a two-state settlement within the context of and according to the terms of international consensus.

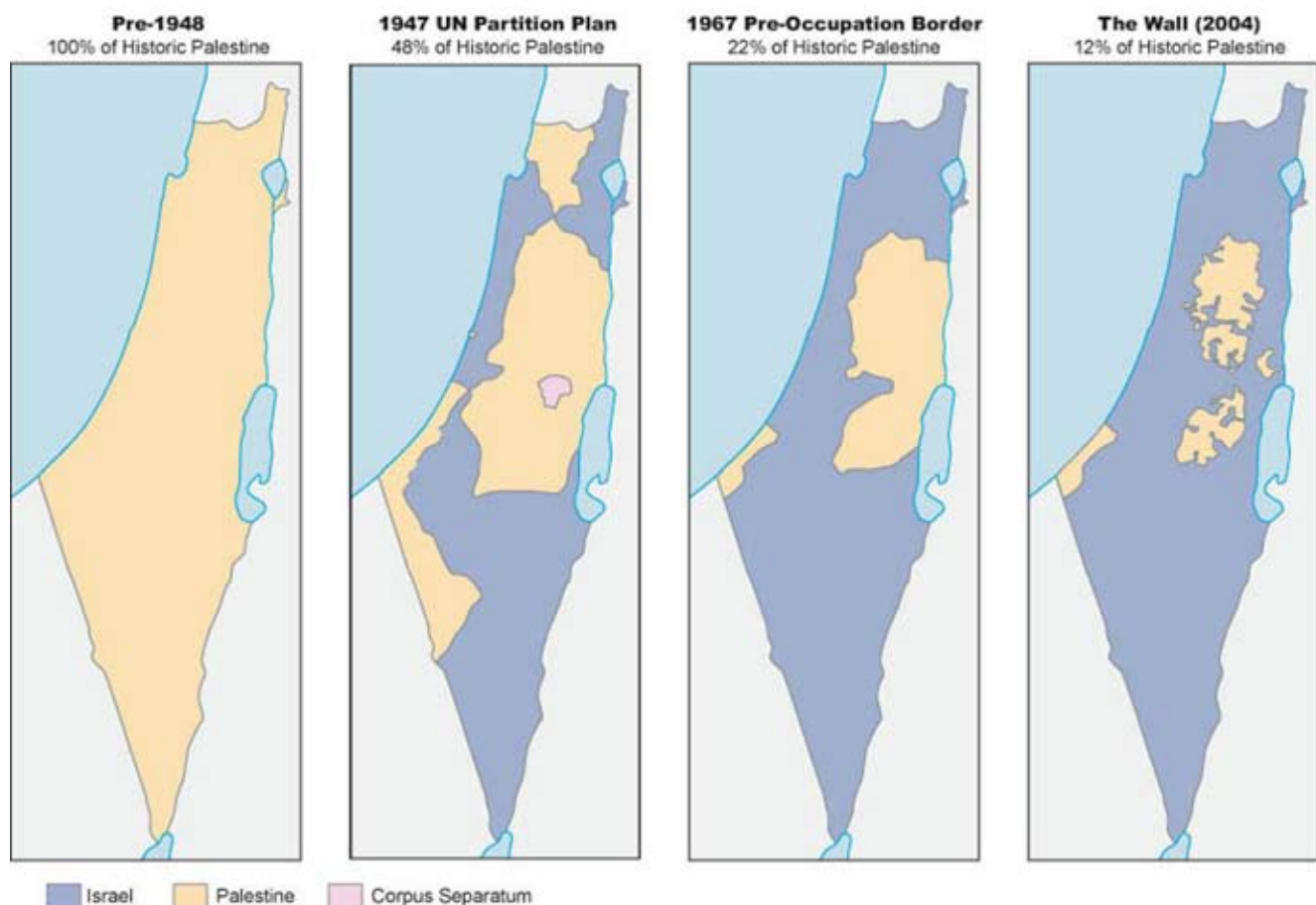
President Obama began his Jan. 22 remarks by noting: “Let me be clear: America is committed to Israel's security. And we will always support Israel's right to defend itself against legitimate threats.” He has in essence reiterated this stance repeatedly in the past couple months. He, on the other hand, has said nothing about the right of Palestinians to defend themselves against far more extreme threats, such as Israeli threats, backed by the United States, that occur almost daily in the Occupied Territories. Obama has underlined the principle that Israel has the right to defend itself. That is correct. But it is also correct that so does everyone else.

The relevant question here is whether Israel has a right to defend itself by force. Few people believe that states have an absolute general right to defend themselves by force. It is necessary, first of all, to find possible peaceful alternatives and/or to be able to demonstrate that peaceful alternatives do not exist. An alternative in this case would have been for Israel to accept and to abide by a ceasefire proposal. Hamas's political leader, Khaled Meshal, proposed a ceasefire agreement days before Israel launched its attack on Dec. 27. Meshal called for a restoration of the 2005 agreement, which called for ending violence, uninterrupted opening of the border, and an Israeli guarantee that non-war goods and people could move freely between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The United States and Israel rejected the 2005 agreement after the free, open, and democratic Palestinian election of January 2006 produced election of the “wrong” people, in the opinion of Israel and the United States.

In the light of all of this, we have Obama's appointment of Mitchell as special envoy. Mitchell's primary achievement in peace-making was his role in the peaceful settlement in Northern Ireland. That settlement called for an end to IRA terror and British violence. There was recognition that although Britain had the right to defend itself from terror, it had no right to do so by force, because a peaceful alternative existed. That alternative was British recognition of the legitimate grievances of the Irish Catholic community, which constituted the roots of IRA terror. When Britain adopted

FIGURE 1

## Destroying the Two-State Solution



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what seemed to be a more sensible course, the terror ended.

The implications of Mitchell's mission with regard to Israel-Palestine are obvious. Their omission at least suggests the commitment of the Obama Administration to the traditional United States position of backing the Israeli government and its rejectionist policies to the hilt.

### Is the Two-State Solution Dead?

The immediate surface problem, faced by George Mitchell as he begins his job as envoy, is to extend a ceasefire in Gaza and to help Gazans rebuild. Perhaps his greatest and most challenging problem, however, is the apparent death of the proposed two-state solution. Since the June 1967 war, a two-state solution, centered upon a land-for-peace proposition, has remained the major focus of diplomatic efforts to re-

solve this conflict. Israel's harsh and unrelenting occupation, based primarily upon Jewish settlements in the West Bank, has not only blocked, but by now has made a two-state solution virtually impossible to achieve, without a drastic and improbable change in Israeli policy and action.

As documentation, consider the following:

1. In 1993, when Israeli Prime Minister Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization chairman Arafat signed the Oslo Agreement, 109,000 Israeli Jews lived in West Bank settlements (not including Jerusalem). The number of Jewish settlers increased steadily and consistently from the end of the Six-Day War in 1967, to 1993. Today, in early 2009, there are more than 275,000 Jewish settlers (not including Jerusalem) living in more than 230 settlements and strategically placed outposts designed to forge and keep permanent Jewish precedence on Palestinian land.



2. Ariel is the biggest Israeli settlement outside of Jerusalem. Twenty thousand Jews live there. Ariel is one-third of the way into the West Bank, but the wall, or “security barrier,” being built by the Israeli government, which protects Ariel, extends further and deeper into occupied territory. Ariel’s leaders and spokespeople consistently proclaim that they are “here to stay,” and they continually try to recruit more American Jews to move to the settlement.

3. Massive infrastructure building to serve and protect the Jewish settlements has cut the West Bank into small pieces, fragmenting the lives of Palestinians and making it easier for the Israeli government to control the Palestinian population in the West Bank. The infrastructure building, which includes military posts, surveillance towers, and roads only for the use of the settlers, allows the settlers easy access to Jerusalem and/or to other places in Israel.

4. In order to ensure the separation of West Bank Arabs and Jews, Israel has erected more than 625 checkpoints, roadblocks, and other barriers. There has been a 70% increase since 2005 in a total area the size of Delaware, the second-smallest state. The Jewish settlers do not have to bother with these obstacles. Palestinians, however, who wish or need to travel between villages and towns, must obtain permits to travel. Even with permits, traveling a short journey often takes hours. Palestinian farmers, attempting to take their produce to markets in trucks in the Summer, too often watch their produce spoil under the hot Sun when delayed, as they often are, for hours or days at the roadblocks. Some pregnant women on their way to a hospital have lost their babies because they were stopped and kept at the roadblock areas.

5. The 200,000 Jews who live in East Jerusalem form a ring around and thus divide the city from the rest of the West Bank. East Jerusalem has been annexed by the State of Israel. It is not likely that the President of a Palestinian state would be able to have a capital in East Jerusalem and at the same time, be able to govern the people of his nation.

6. During the 41-year period of occupation, the Israeli government and Jewish settlers have made massive changes on the ground. Most of this has been accomplished since 1993, and the initiation of the so-called peace process. Consolidated settlements, land swaps, construction of roads and bridges for Jews have cut up Palestinian areas in order to maintain Jewish presence. It is highly unlikely that Israel will

allow all of this to be destroyed, or even to be drastically changed, so that a viable, contiguous Palestinian state can be established.

7. Many of the Jewish settlers are ultra-Orthodox, messianic, fundamentalist, religious Zionists; they fervently believe that the entire West Bank is part of the land promised to the Jews by God. They believe that it would be a sin to relinquish any of this “promised land” to non-Jews, and they are ready and willing to fight anyone, including Israeli soldiers, who might try to evict them. It is sheer folly to believe that any Israeli government in the near future, especially the new, incoming, rightist government headed by Prime Minister Netanyahu, will even seriously consider uprooting these settlers in order to have a Palestinian state established in the West Bank. Israeli President Shimon Peres warned in London recently that any attempt by the Israeli government to evict settlers could trigger a civil war among Israeli Jews. That will not happen.

Mitchell will continue to hear from numerous people, some of whom are former United States negotiators, that, as Aaron Miller wrote in *The Much Too Promised Land*, the two-state solution still is the “least bad alternative.” These people argue that the continuation of the status quo would be a nightmare, that expulsion of West Bank Palestinians to Jordan is completely unacceptable, and that a one-state solution would mean the end of the Jewish state and would put Jews in jeopardy.

### **A Note of Hope**

It was Albert Einstein who believed in “sympathetic cooperation” between “the two great Semitic peoples,” and who insisted that “no problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.” A few more Israeli Jews and Palestinians are beginning to think now, as some thought previously, about what this theory, posited by Einstein, would mean if practiced. These people and others, perhaps even Mitchell, might be encouraged a bit by recalling the advocacy of the great Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, who argued for a binational state of “joint sovereignty” with “complete equality of rights between the two partners.” Such a state in historic Palestine would be predicated upon “the love of their homeland that the two peoples share.” It is then on a note of hope, rather than upon today’s realism, that I shall end.