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Israel Must Perceive Conflict with Palestinians as Political Issues -- Not Military -- Says UD Mideast Expert

University of Dayton

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ISRAEL MUST PERCEIVE CONFLICT WITH PALESTINIANS AS POLITICAL ISSUE — NOT MILITARY — SAYS UD MIDEAST EXPERT

DAYTON, Ohio — If peace is to come to the Middle East, Israel must “discontinue using full-scale military force to deal with what is a political conflict,” said Ellen Fleischmann, assistant professor of history at the University of Dayton. “It needs to completely withdraw its forces and heavy equipment from all areas of the occupied territories.”

Fleischmann’s words follow Tuesday’s assault by Israeli tanks and helicopters on Palestinian leader Yassar Arafat’s security headquarters. It also comes during a week when Israel Prime Minister Ariel Sharon proposed permanent exile for Arafat, a suggestion Arafat steadfastly discounted.

“Apparently, Sharon has no interest in some ultimate solution,” said Fleischmann, an expert on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. “He has never indicated what he foresees as the future; he is only interested in containment and a cease-fire. He needs to clarify Israel’s — or, at least, his — vision of a political solution.”

The Palestinians, on the other hand, have few options to ease the strain between them and the Israeli government, Fleischmann said. “I really believe that the asymmetry of power is such that there is little the Palestinians themselves can do to reduce the tension.”

There is much talk on the “culture of suicide bombers,” Fleischmann said, “but we need to recognize that it is more a pathology brought about by the brutal 35-year occupation, and that virtually all young Palestinians have experienced in their entire lives — lives without hope or a future.”

During four years of living in the West Bank, Fleischmann made friends and acquaintances with many Palestinians who did not embrace the actions of suicide bombers. But they had all been “seriously affected by living under the longest military occupation in history.

“When I lived there, I did not know one young man over the age of 16 who had not been arrested by the Israeli occupation authorities — often for some ‘crime’ such as not carrying their required identity card, or for being politically involved in ‘terrorist’ organizations, such as their student council,” said Fleischmann, who lived in the West Bank from 1986-88 (during the “first” intifada), where she taught at the Friends Girls School in Ramallah, then returning from - over -

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1992-94 to do research. "The accumulation of such experiences brings some people to hatred and a breaking point."

Fleischmann said the U.S. government and U.S. media's insistence that Arafat can stop the Palestinian suicide bombings is hindering the peace process, and has created a perception that there is a balance of power between the Palestinians and Israel.

"When Arafat issues orders to stop the violence, it is doubtful that he even has the power and ability to restrain his own followers, much less the more extremist factions and individuals who do not accept his authority," Fleischmann said. "Press reports indicate that the armed factions are saying that they do not recognize his authority."

Furthermore, Arafat is "effectively imprisoned and his staff, security officers, buildings and equipment are all under attack or destroyed. How is he supposed to do such a thing as 'control' the violence? How can you ask police officers who are being shot to death themselves by Israeli forces to try to rein in violence in order to protect Israelis?"

Pressure is mounting in the occupied territories, Fleischmann said, precisely because occupied territories exist: "Palestinians are unable to move freely, to work, to live normal lives. The situation breeds hatred, deprivation and tension. Unemployment, insecurity, uncertainty about the future — these cause the tension which has reached the breaking point for Palestinians."

She added, "The individuals who are willing to sacrifice themselves in killing Israelis are people without hope or a sense of the future. If there are moves toward diplomatic and political solutions, the tension will ease some."

When that happens, Fleischmann said the "majority of Palestinians who are not suicide bombers, and who want to live their lives in peace, will be able to actually do something. For now, they are locked up in their homes, under attack and siege. This is not a situation that promotes peaceful coexistence."

As for the U.S.'s role in the conflict, Fleischmann said it must be involved in a "responsible, sustained and serious way. Our government needs to work very hard to convince the Palestinians and the rest of the Arab and Muslim world that it is concerned with solving the conflict itself, and not just interested in garnering support for its policies in its 'war against terrorism.'"

"There is deep bitterness and cynicism in the region about the U.S.'s role — or should I say 'non-role' these days — in the conflict," said Fleischmann, a member of the editorial review board for the Arab Studies Journal, a peer-reviewed, independent publication that covers Arab and Middle Eastern studies. "Only the U.S. can restrain and influence Israel."

Peace is possible in the Middle East, she said, but only if "real attention is paid to a just peace, and Israel is willing to give up land — period. The Palestinians made their commitment to accepting only a small percentage of what was their land, pre-1948. Now Israel - more -
has to accept that they cannot keep the entire land for themselves. It is, at its essence, really, that simple.”

Signs of hope for peace are found in the small groups of Palestinians and Israelis who are still friends, said Fleischmann, recalling an e-mail she received recently from a Palestinian friend who wrote that one of her Israeli friends calls her three times a day to check on her, her young son and husband. The woman also recounted in her e-mail a small group of Israeli medical workers who put on display a destroyed Palestinian ambulance in Tel Aviv as protest against their government’s assaults.

“What is striking about this account is her warmth, friendship and respect for these Israelis, which remains intact under incredibly difficult circumstances,” Fleischmann said. “It is a small seed, but it demonstrates the possibilities and hope for the future. That seed has not been completely destroyed yet, which is remarkable.”

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