

Disillusioned

By Oren Nahari

I remember those meetings well. Time after time, in the optimistic early 1990s. The interviews with Senator George Mitchell, the talks with European negotiators, when the Good Friday Agreement was signed (aimed at democratically resolving the conflict in Northern Ireland based on the will of the people). Conversations with European colleagues were always courteous, but not without a touch of condescension, as though the hidden message was to say: “You in the Middle East may have not figured it out yet, but one day you’ll realize what we in Europe and the West already know: the triumph of globalization, the huge benefits of open borders and free passage.” Nationality is dead, my European counterparts used to tell me, or on its deathbed. The old world of wars is dead; this is the dawn of a new day, a different and optimistic world in which every conflict can be resolved by peaceful and democratic means.

It was the time of Francis Fukuyama’s groundbreaking book, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). We won, wrote the American scholar. We, the liberal optimistic West. We defeated our enemies – the religious fundamentalists, the Nazis, the fascists and now also the communists. The whole world understands now that the only way to attain prosperity and wealth is liberal democracy and a free market economy. Euphoria prevailed. The Communist bloc collapsed with barely a single gunshot. China began its slow ascent, and the Mujahideen in Afghanistan were considered brave freedom fighters who helped bring down the Soviet Union (one James Bond movie portrayed them as fearless warriors – worthy successors of the romantic, orientalist figures of Omar Sharif and his men, the desert warriors galloping alongside Peter O’Toole in the movie “Lawrence of Arabia”).

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Israel, too, was swept up in the euphoria: inspired by the optimistic mood in the West, the small Middle Eastern country was forging its own peace process, this time with the Palestinians. At the end of a clandestine and relatively short process, the agreement was signed, and the rest is history: immediately afterwards, horrific attacks were launched by elements seeking to undermine the attempt to resolve the long and bloody conflict. These included a murderous assault on Palestinians at the Tomb of the Patriarchs by Israeli citizen Baruch Goldstein, and Hamas bomb attacks in Israel. These events, along with the assassination of the Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, who was leading the peace process, by a fellow Jewish Israeli, achieved their goal and foiled the peace process with impressive success.

In my talks with representatives of Europe’s political elites in the 1990s, in the context of the Good Friday Agreement, they explained that while Europe had to undergo two world wars, at the end of a painful learning process it finally recognized the benefits of peace, and especially that peace leads to dismantling nationality, harmony between neighbors, and social and economic prosperity for all parties. The zeitgeist was to expand the EU to the east and south and promote the European integration project to the point of creating a political framework that would constitute the United States of Europe.

The nation-state is here to stay

However, with all the advantages of the EU – and it is a success story beyond a shadow of a doubt, despite the current political farce of Brexit – I reminded my interlocutors that nationality is alive and no country has given up on its flag, anthem, street signs or stamps commemorating warriors and kings who killed their neighbors; the FIFA World Cup or the European Championship have yet to see an English or Dutch fan

switch to rooting for Germany after his team was knocked out because they are both in the EU.

Moreover, the tragedy in Yugoslavia, which was occurring at the time, proved that Fukuyama's utopian vision lay a long way off and may well have never existed. Countries began to fragment into their old ethnic components – Czechs and Slovaks parted amicably, while Serbs, Croats, Bosnians and Slovenes entered into a war that included ethnic cleansing, mutual killings and horrific war crimes. All this took place in the heart of Europe, in the last decade of the 20th century, at the same time as the European integration project was being enthusiastically promoted in its western part.

Despite signs that the new world order and the global paradigm of free-market democracies living in harmony were beginning to crumble, the global West continued its Herculean efforts to convince Israel and the Palestinians of the advantages of the Oslo Accords. You could recite in your sleep the mantra of a safe Israel and a self-sustaining Palestine living side by side in peace. The two-state solution became a slogan to which everyone declared loyalty at some point – American presidents, European foreign ministers, Israeli prime ministers, heads of the Palestinian Authority. The problem was that the slogan remained the same over the years, while reality changed.

Looking back at my conversations in the 1990s with Irish, British and American diplomats, they argued in interviews, with the best of intentions and full of good will, that the positive experience of conflict resolution in Northern Ireland could be replicated in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with the Oslo Accords, neatly erasing all the differences between the two disputes. Ireland was once considered unsolvable too, they said. Ireland suffered hundreds of years of hostility, decades of violence and yet, if you just gather good-willed people around a table, the solution will come naturally.

Beyond the obvious differences between the two conflicts – for example, the Irish one is between people who share the same culture, language and heritage, as opposed to the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – I believe that the most significant difference that also signaled the beginning of the growing diverging trajectory between the international (Western) community and the Israeli peace camp of the early 1990s was the public reaction to the violent attempts to derail the peace accords in both cases. Thus, when trying an Irish terrorist group who sabotaged the process by carrying out a terror attack in Omagh, the public response was a wall-to-wall condemnation, and indeed, this was the last terror attack. Yet similar attacks against Israeli civilians were enthusiastically welcomed by Palestinians. This deeply undermined Israeli willingness to continue supporting the peace process.

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The great optimism that prevailed among what came to be known as the peace camp – a powerful segment of the population – and especially among the elites, became detached from events on the ground. Protesters against the accords, who were initially on the margins of Israeli society, and whose opinions were overlooked during the heyday of the accords, began to seem right after all – especially those who voiced concern for security reasons, less than those who opposed the agreement for religious reasons.

Goodbye and good riddance

Some time ago, I attended an event organized by “Women Wage Peace” in Israel’s secular-dovish stronghold – Rabin Square in Tel Aviv. The event was held to mark the 40th anniversary of the peace treaty with Egypt, signed by legendary rightwing prime minister Menachem Begin – a treaty that is at the heart of the Israeli consensus. Barely 200 people showed up. This meager participation may not represent reality, but it does symbolically reflect the mood in Israel a quarter of a century after the Oslo Accords were signed.

Today, ‘peace’ is almost a dirty word that elicits sniggers at best, except perhaps on the political fringes. Accordingly, there is not a single person in a position of power in Israeli politics today who is willing to stand behind the equation proudly touted in the 1990s: “land for peace”. That was the logic of the agreement with Egypt and it was supposed to govern the Oslo Accords with the Palestinians, too.

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How did we get to this point, where peace has gone from being the dream of many Israelis to a wedge issue? Not a subject of legitimate debate over the parameters of peace, or the risks versus the odds and so on – but a symbol of something negative and even toxic in the context of election campaigns?

Contrary to popular belief, peace lost its currency not due to the rise of the right, but because Israelis have shifted their understanding of the cost and benefits of an agreement, even those who enthusiastically supported the idea in the 1990s. For the average Israeli couple worried about their children’s future, reality has shown that there is no Palestinian partner for peace. Therefore, they no longer believe in the possibility of an agreement that can benefit their family and thus view the pro-peace agenda as unreasonable and too risky. As far as they are concerned, the idea of peace is no longer tenable and must be replaced with a political plan that poses less of a threat to their lives. For the average Israeli, former prime minister Ehud Barak offered Yasser Arafat a far-reaching compromise at Camp David.

The Palestinians could have accepted, as then Egyptian president Mubarak urged them to do. They could have continued negotiating to improve their position. Instead, Israel was rewarded with the second intifada (2000-2005), which claimed the lives of hundreds of innocent civilians. Incessant suicide bombings in major cities, including the murder of dozens of teenagers at the Dolphinarium discotheque in Tel Aviv; the attack on a Passover dinner for senior citizens and Holocaust survivors at a hotel; and attacks on restaurants that killed entire families. It is hard to find fault with Israelis for losing faith in the peace process, and hard to believe that well-meaning Europeans or Americans would retain their faith in similar circumstances. The 9/11 attacks were another blow that occurred during the second intifada and reinforced Israeli right-wing parties, which pointed to the attacks as proof of the existence of a clash of cultures between the enlightened democratic West and Islam.

When the second intifada subsided in 2005, Sharon’s government implemented the Gaza disengagement plan, evacuating 8,000 settlers and demolishing their homes. The international community, and the European Union in particular, which saw the evacuation of settlements as a welcome step toward implementing the two-state solution, enthusiastically supported the withdrawal, and Israel as a whole was glad to leave Gaza. The government’s promise, or rather commitment, was that the disengagement would promote positive change for all parties involved and that, after the disengagement, the Palestinians in Gaza would build up their lives and exist in peace alongside Israelis.



The evacuation of the Israeli community Tel Katifa was part of the Gaza Disengagement, which took place during the summer of 2005. – [Source: IDF](#)

That didn't happen. Israelis generally believe that the withdrawal from Gaza is what led to Hamas' rise to power, to barrages of rockets on towns and villages in southern Israel, and to the death of the idea that giving up land can be rewarded with peace. The Arab Spring, which began six years later, added a regional dimension to this skepticism: not only are Palestinians not a partner for peace, but the vision of Western democratization has no relevance to the wild Middle East, where only the fittest survive. The 1990s narrative of the peace camp that ceding land would lead to an agreement, was replaced with the narratives that Israel has no partner for peace and is a villa in the Middle Eastern jungle. The new dominant narrative in Israeli society led to a decline in the number of Israeli politicians ready to fight for peace in public.

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The dominant narratives in Israeli society, which question the advisability of a peace agreement with the Palestinians, are deeply embedded. The major concern in Israel is that even if there is a miracle and Israel and the Palestinians were to sign a peace agreement, at worst the Palestinians will not want to abide by them after Israel withdraws its forces, and at best will be unable to do so. The territory that Israel leaves will become a hotbed of terrorist cells, as has happened – according to the common view – in Gaza, and in places such as Syria and Libya. Since, unlike the Gaza Strip, the West Bank stretches along the length of Israel, there is even concern that terrorist cells armed with anti-aircraft missiles will stand on the hills overlooking Tel Aviv and bring down passenger planes landing at Israel's major airport. The public fears that Israel will go back to the days of exploding buses and murdered civilians, met with cries of joy in Gaza and Ramallah.

The broken promise

The last quarter of a century since the signing of the Oslo Accords has constituted another chapter in the receding relevance of the leftist agenda among Israelis. Israel's first elections were won by the Workers'

Party (Mapai), established by the founding fathers of the state and led by the first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, roughly the equivalent to the Social-Democrats in Germany or Labor in the UK. The second largest party at the time was the left-wing United Workers' Party (Mapam), which blindly worshiped Stalin, unquestioningly accepted the USSR's position on the Doctors' Plot – when the vast majority of those killed were Jews – and mourned the death of the “father of nations”.

Later, in 1989, the Communist bloc began to disintegrate and one of the casualties was the ideas of the left. Nationalism reemerged, technological and economic changes drove the gradual disappearance of traditional production jobs, and the increased flow of capital and workers changed the inner structure of every country in the world. The established European parties did not talk about the elephant in the room, even as the elephant continued growing. Residents of Europe and the West began to gradually form a new identity that defined itself against the globalist Western identity promoted by advocates of the new global order.

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In the years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the elites preached that the new order would benefit everyone, while many in the West watched their economic and social situation deteriorating. The global order was wonderful for the cosmopolitan elite, for those with the skills demanded by the economy, and they catapulted forward. But they were not the majority. Most of the population continued to consist of French farmers, German laborers, young adults and Israelis who had completed their military service.

They live in a world in which the old order, which though imperfect was sufficiently relaxed and mostly secure, has disappeared. Secure jobs with guaranteed pensions are a thing of the past; peace processes can result in terrorism and less personal security; toppling dictators can lead to the rise of terrorist organizations, fundamentalist Islam and deadly civil wars; attempting to overthrow a murderous regime can bring waves of immigrants to Europe and undermine the political order. The distinction between good and evil has become less clear, and skepticism has grown about the promise of democracy, the free market, and the vision of progress and modernity.

Then came the turn of populist leaders. The rise of populist movements began after the collapse of faith in the Western progressive narrative of the 1990s – namely, that through the process of democratization and peace between countries, and through opening markets, each generation will be able to live better than the previous one. Supporters of the populist right in the West vocally declare that their vote is a protest against the existing order, and that they refuse to accept what the political elite has done to them.

Therefore, the rise of a new populist right wing in Israel cannot be held accountable for the failure of the peace process, just as the global crisis of liberal democracy cannot be attributed to right-wing forces emerging around the world – in the US, Eastern Europe, Brazil and India. The Israeli peace camp collapsed and disappeared before the populist right rose to power.

The New Order

With the Middle East in turmoil, and separately from the global rise of the right, the EU or even the Palestinians, the kaleidoscope is turning again. The Sunni Arab states, which fear the growing influence of Iran, the gradual withdrawal of the US from the region and domestic instability, have effectively abandoned the Palestinians without formally acknowledging it. These countries maintain more or less covert relationships with Israel, closely cooperate on security, and seek help and ties with Israel. Moreover, the president in Washington now relies on an evangelical electorate that sees Israel as part of the divine plan for salvation.

That is why there is currently no significant pressure on the Israeli leadership to change the status quo and

strive for an agreement. On the contrary, any threat to the status quo raises real concern among the vast majority of Israelis, far beyond the messianic right that ideologically opposes concessions in the West Bank. At present, proactive efforts on the Israeli side to end the status quo and promote peace with the Palestinians are limited to a handful of peace activists on the margins of society.

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The idea that peace has been trampled underfoot by unscrupulous populist leaders, and that if only Netanyahu and Trump were replaced, peace would magically come about, is not an action plan. It is a fantasy bordering on the messianic. The world is far more complex. I would be very happy to live in a world of democracies with citizens actively involved in decision making, leaders who prioritize the good of the people, and everyone willing to concede a little history and nationalism in favor of peace and cooperation with neighbors. I don't know when such a world ever existed. What is certain is that this has not been a reality for many years. The potential fruits of peace will always lose out before the anxiety generated by Jihadi John or threats of annihilation issued by Iranian ayatollahs. Israel lives in a dangerous and hostile environment – Europe in a peaceful, prosperous neighborhood. The irony is that while Europe advocated for Israel to adopt its concepts of peace and understanding, what actually happened is not that the Middle East began to resemble Europe, but that Europe, in particular, is currently facing the problems created in the Middle East.

In conclusion, the peace agreement in Northern Ireland was supposed to be a model, proving that as long as there are people with good will and a positive vision, peace and reconciliation can be attained even after terrible bloodshed and generations who grew up in the shadow of protracted conflict. It happened in Europe: the very existence of the EU, and the profusion of agreements between historical enemies such as France and Germany, prove that it's possible, along with Ireland. They do not prove that this is possible everywhere, and in any set of circumstances.

Israeli leaders promised peace and longed for it. “Song for Peace” is one of Israel's favorite informal anthems. Actions taken to advance peace were met with tremendous support, despite the high prices paid by citizens. It worked with Egypt and Jordan – and failed with the Palestinians. For now, the mutual blame game continues, and is likely to continue in the near future as there is no leader on the horizon, on either side, who can bring about a peace agreement, or wishes to do so.