

THE HINDU

Date:04/09/2007 URL:

<http://www.thehindu.com/2007/09/04/stories/2007090455340900.htm>

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Two hands for a clap

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Ending the conflict with Palestinians is more complicated than Israel's withdrawal.

— PHOTO: AP



Amjad Khalawi, a former Palestinian militant recently granted amnesty by Israel, at a party before his wedding at a refugee camp near Bethlehem. Israel agreed to stop hunting Khalawi and 200 other Palestinians as part of efforts to boost Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah Party.

Egypt's Ambassador to India Mohamed Higazy, in his article in *The Hindu* on August 23, mentioned the term *Israeli occupation* 20 times which creates an impression that only if Israel withdraws from the territories captured in the 1967 war, peace and harmony will return to the Middle East. And that Israeli stubbornness to control 2.5 million Palestinians in the West Bank is the only source of all the troubles in the Middle East and beyond. I find this approach one-sided and short-sighted.

May I remind the distinguished writer and the readers that every conflict has two sides. In order to resolve the conflict and to arrive at peace, each side is expected to take a few steps and make some concessions.

I didn't find a word in the article on what Palestinians should do in order to get the desired peace. Not a word on stopping terrorism and the deadly Kassam rockets fired into Israeli territories, targeting innocent civilians; not a word on restraining them from making incitements; not a word on disarming militias; not a word on ending terrorist attacks against Israeli citizens. I hope this is not the way the writer thinks peace should look like.

Just to remind you, Israel withdrew fully from the Gaza strip in August 2005, dismantling all settlements in that region, paving way for peace in the region. The occupation in Gaza ended. And what was the Palestinian response? Building industrial plants? Planting more

trees for agricultural purpose? Initiating economic projects? Unfortunately not. They responded by firing rockets into the Israeli territories. We did not see an attempt to take the destiny of the state in their own hands by building the infrastructure for the state. It is much easier to blame the occupation than make efforts to build roads, educate the people, and promote co-existence.

It is important to say that Israel would like to live in peace, side-by-side with the Palestinian state, viable and prosperous and be a part of the Middle East striving for economic and social development. We have so much to contribute in the areas of agriculture, hi-tech industries, medicine, education. Not because we want to control but because we want to support the development of the region. Because we believe that prosperous and stable neighbours are good neighbours.

Putting an end to the Israel-Palestinian conflict is far more complicated than the Israeli withdrawal. Israel is ready to take risks but will not withdraw from territories captured in the 1967 war unless it gets a reasonable guarantee that by doing so it will not be exposed to the dangers of terrorism or incursions from those territories. The precedent set in Gaza (despite the full withdrawal, rockets continue to fall almost daily into Israel) is not encouraging towards immediate withdrawal in the West Bank. What kind of guarantee will we have that after such a withdrawal rockets and missiles will not target Israel's only international airport, situated just 15 km away from the Palestinian settlements in the West Bank?

Territorial issue is only one element of the conflict. The writer did not mention a word about Palestinian refugees wishing to return to Israel. Those refugees and their future is a subject in every negotiation between the Israelis and Palestinians. Any Israeli withdrawal that will not resolve the issue of the Palestinian refugees will not bring an end to the conflict.

The Palestinian movement is divided into two sides and at this moment Israel cannot rely on either side for its safety. Hamas, which took over the control of Gaza in a violent coup against the Palestinian Authority forces, is not ready to recognise Israel. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, who is our partner in the peace negotiations, has, at this stage, difficulties in fulfilling his commitment for peace in the case of an agreement between two sides.

The Arab states have an important role in the peace negotiations. It could be constructive and supportive and can help to bring an end to the conflict. Giving patronage and encouraging the Hamas leadership in Damascus, failing to prevent the arms smuggling to Gaza or helping to arm Hizbollah cannot be considered a constructive role towards peaceful resolution of the conflict. Instead, they can use their influence to assert to the Palestinians that their destiny is in their own hands, if they renounce terror and commit to the dialogue. Only in this way can Palestinians promote their cause and the peace process as a whole. And in that case, they will find Israel as a receptive and supportive partner in the negotiations towards the peaceful solution of the conflict.

(The writer is Consul General of Israel, Mumbai.)

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