

Diary of Thoughts on the May 2021 Israel and Palestine Conflict
From After the Cease Fire to the Beginning
Daniel Spiro

May 23 –

The year was 1968. There was no real “Occupation” of the West Bank. In fact, the very first settlements were only then popping up, and the memory of the Six Day War had hardly faded. Still, the Arab-Israeli Conflict, as it was then commonly known in America, was a polarizing influence in the Western World.

At that time, one American television show stood out for its combination of humanitarianism and hope. It was, not surprisingly, the show that gave us the first lip-to-lip kiss between a white person and a black person in the history of American TV. This show gave us mind-melds between species, futuristic lawyers who disdain computers and only read books, leaders who always put their underlings first, and devoted professionals who don’t let their trades get in the way of appreciating philosophy, music, art, science, or history.

Ah, Star Trek. It was such a pleasure being in grade school when you were first aired. Thanks for the education!

If you want to watch a truly wonderful episode of the Original Star Trek that will make you appreciate the 17-year cicada brood that is currently gracing the Washington D.C. area, watch the Devil in the Dark. It was Arthur C. Clarke’s favorite episode of Trek, and clearly one of the most humanistic. [Star Trek The Original Series S01E25 The Devil in the Dark - Bing video](#)

But if you want to see a slightly less beloved, and yet still poignant, episode of Trek about the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict, you’ll make sure to view Let That Be Your Last Battlefield, which was created in 1968 and aired in January of the following year. [Star Trek - S03 E15 - Let That Be Your Last Battlefield - Bing video](#). This episode, which takes place virtually entirely on the Enterprise, focuses on two visitors, Lokai (who is black on the left side of his face and white on the right side) and Bele (who is black on the left and white on the right). So yes, this brings in the silliness of the whole “black versus white” racism that was also explored in such works as Dr. Seuss’s *The Sneetches*. But when you really watch the episode, you will see that it is an especially apt metaphor for the two groups of Semites who are battling it out in the place many of us know as the Holy Land.

Bele represents the Israeli; Lokai, the Palestinian. Bele is chasing down Lokai in space, while thinking that at home, his people is of necessity subjugating Lokai’s. Lokai, for his part, is not only fleeing Bele but gathering sympathy and support for his own cause wherever he can find it from third parties, including the crew of the Enterprise. Bele (played by Frank Gorshin, who is best known as the Riddler in *Batman*) plays his part with the callousness and smugness that have come to be associated with having superior military, political or economic power. As for Lokai, he is as self-righteous and utopian as you might expect from the one who is perpetually playing the victim. Surely, nobody gives an inch. And the episode ends as you might expect – and it isn’t a two-state solution!

What I love most about the episode is its ending. It occurs after Bele has figured out a way to guide the Enterprise back to where his people and Lokai's reside, or at least where he thought they resided. I'll let the words of the script speak for themselves:

Spock: Coming within visual range now, Captain.

Kirk: Checkov, put it on the screen. Extreme magnification. What are you picking up?

Spock: Several large cities, uninhabited. Extensive traffic systems, barren of traffic. Lower animal and vegetation encroaching on the cities. No sapient life-forms registering at all, Captain. There is no evidence of natural disaster, yet there are vast numbers of unburied corpses in all cities.

Kirk: You mean, all the people are dead?

Spock: All dead, Captain. They have annihilated each other totally. ...

Bele (talking to Lokai): Your band of murderers did this.

Lokai: Your genocidal maniacs did this! (They attack each other again.)

Kirk: Stop it! What's the matter with you two? Didn't you hear Spock? Your planet is dead? There's nobody alive on Cheron because of hate. The cause you fought about no longer exists. Give yourselves time to breathe. Give up your hate. You're welcome to live with us. Listen to me. You both must end up dead if you don't stop hating?

Lokai: You're an idealistic dreamer. (Lokai leaves) ...

Bele: He must not escape me. ...

Uhura: Captain, someone has activated the transporter mechanism. ...

Spock. Transporter room is clear. However, there is a life-form materializing on the planet. It is Lokai. He is back on Cheron.

Kirk: There's nobody there to try him. His judges are all dead.

Uhura: Captain, the transporter mechanism has been activated again. ...

Spock: It is Bele, Captain. And another life-form has appeared on Cheron.

Uhura: It doesn't make any sense.

Spock: To expect sense from two mentalities of such extreme viewpoints is not logical.

Sulu: But their planet's dead. Does it matter now which one's right?

Spock: Not to Lokai and Bele. All that matters to them is their hate.

Uhura (addressing Kirk): Do you suppose that's all they ever had, sir?

Kirk: No, but that's all they have left.

May 22 –

Pardon all my Ps, but polarization is a put-off particularly because polarized people become predictable parrots of party-lines. Ah, but it does provide a silver lining. It is ironic to see how those on both poles of a debate invariably find a way to profoundly agree with each other.

Take, for example, the conventional debate between atheism and traditional Western religion. Both sides completely agree that “God” is to be defined as narrowly as possible – as the omniscient, human-like deity who gave us the Abrahamic Scriptures. The traditionalists feel threatened by any alternative conception of God (such as the “God of the Philosophers”), so when anyone expresses a broader view of divinity, they respond: “That’s not God. Only the main character in the Western Scriptures is God. We own the term. We’ll tell you what it means.” As for the atheists, they also want “God” defined in a narrow, restrictive and seemingly pre-modern way so that as many Enlightenment Era people as possible will be turned off by it and start to see themselves as atheists. In this way, both “polar opposites” become rivals of so-called “progressive religion,” in which people conceive of God in different ways and religion generally becomes more pluralistic and less dominated by the old Western dogmas.

In the case of the Israel-Palestine Conflict, the two opposite poles also ironically agree on a fundamental point. It is in affirming the near-omnipotence of the Jews. Yes, you heard me. The Jews – the same people who were kicked around by one European power after another for centuries on end between the first century of the Common Era and the middle of the 20th, the same people who now make up a mere one-fifth of one percent of the world’s population, the same people who frequently dress in a way that marks them as different, tribal, primitive, silly, you name it – are viewed by both sets of combatants primarily in terms of their extreme power.

It would make sense that the Palestinians and their partisans would view the Jews/Israelis in that way. That allows the Palestinians to present themselves purely as innocent victims of an unsympathetic Goliath, which can only be stopped if all the good people of the world rally together against it. Such is the strategy of the BDS Movement (Boycott, Divest, Sanction), which contemplates the Jews/Israelis being brought to their knees by economic pressure coming from every corner of the globe based on an international consensus against apartheid, racism, imperialism, colonialism, Nazism, and all the other things that the Great Bully of the Middle East supposedly stands for.

Strike that – I said it makes sense that the Palestinians would wish to emphasize Jewish/Israeli power. But I should have added, “up to a point.” You see, the Palestinians have become so obsessed with their own sense of victimization that it has gotten in the way of their ability to problem solve and thereby lift themselves up out of their current predicament. To take an example of someone I think of as a problem solver, Martin Luther King Jr. surely appreciated the victimization of the African-American experience. But he knew how important it was to remain fundamentally constructive, affirming, universalist, and not anti-white. He helped build a movement that didn’t repel or induce fear. His was the voice of inclusion, of love, even more than of resistance. Imagine such voices dominating the Palestinian airwaves and the effect they could have on the Israeli psyche.

So yes, there is plenty of work that can be done on the Palestinian end to show empathy with the Jewish narrative, with the historic plight of the Jewish people, and most importantly with the idea of an ultimate compromise. Such voices have, of course, always existed in Palestine, but they get drowned out by the more extremist elements, whose refrain of “Resist, Resist, Resist” sounds largely the same whether it comes with bombs or merely bile. Still, at least I can understand why the Palestinians, who from the days of the Nakba have truly been victims of the creation of the Jewish State, would come to see the Jews/Israelis largely in terms of having outsized amounts of power.

What I don't understand, however, is how the right-wing Israelis have allowed themselves to fall prey to this same image of Israel's near-omnipotence. To be fair, I do understand that some sort of self-image makeover was needed. We are, after all, talking about a country that was founded in the Ashes of Auschwitz. The concept of the bookish Jew-as-Nebbish was already engrained in our collective psyches well before the Holocaust. But when you add the “sheep to the slaughter” metaphor to those previous insecurities, the Israelis clearly needed to adopt a more macho, athletic and aggressive persona. Just as every member of the Israeli Defense Force must take the “Never Again” pledge, the Jewish people as a whole would have been foolish to embark on the project of establishing its own state without having faith that it could protect itself militarily against a sea of hostile neighbors in a world in which the Jew will forever remain as but a drop in the demographic bucket. Without a healthy dose of Jewish self-confidence, in other words, the Israeli project would be doomed from the start.

But having more than a modicum of self-confidence is one thing. Believing in one's near-omnipotence is something entirely different -- and in this case, as far as I'm concerned, unfathomable. Jews are tiny in number, and widely hated around the world. How could we possibly think a Jewish State could be so powerful that it could perpetually keep its boot on the neck of another people and leave it there, decade after decade, without getting kicked in return? Today, Jewish Israelis generally seem to think that they can either cleanse the Land of their gentile adversaries or maintain the status quo indefinitely, which consists of never-ending hostilities between themselves and their closest neighbors and the solidification of their own international reputation as bullies. As weapons technologies get more and more sophisticated, this little country of Israel is obviously more and more at risk -- but apparently, most Israelis don't want to think like that. They place trust in men like Bibi Netanyahu, the demagogue who whipped up mass hatred against one of the greatest peacemakers this nation has ever seen (Rabin) until he was ultimately assassinated. The Israeli people apparently think that Bibi and his ilk will keep that boot on the Palestinian neck forever, while Israel builds more and more settlements, announcing less and less of an interest in compromising on land. How can this be explained other than from delusions of grandeur in terms of one's own sheer power?

Unlike so many on the political left, I freely admit that I have no crystal ball. I will not proclaim certain outcomes “dead.” I have no idea how this conflict will end. Just because I can write doesn't make me arrogant. Honestly, it doesn't. What I am is afraid. Afraid that the Palestinian willingness to see themselves more as victims than as problem solvers and that the Israeli over-compensation for the Jew-as-Nebbish stereotype is making it impossible for these two people to

get together and compromise on a solution. If only we could agree on a land swap as easily as we can agree on an image of Israel and her relationship to power, then we would have peace.

May 20 –

Thankfully, it looks like the fighting will cease in Israel and Palestine. The people in the region can breathe better, and the killing will stop. But that is only temporary, as we all know. The real question is whether we will have learned anything from this round of fighting that can propel us closer to a true, lasting peace.

My hope is that some of you who have avoided thinking about the Conflict in the past will begin to involve yourself in it going forward. The less involved you have been, the more dispassionate you are likely to be. And that means you might be able to bring to the table what so many of the folks in the region (and their allies) don't bring -- a sincere appreciation for both the Israeli and the Palestinian narratives.

Everyone involved in the Conflict claims to be familiar with both narratives. And yet, curiously, most tend to push aside one, and glorify the other. To me, that misses what is uniquely compelling about this particular conflict: both peoples have held land in this region, have had that land taken away from them through no fault of their own, and have had to suffer in statelessness and poverty for a long period of time in a world with states and resources aplenty. Yes, of course I'm simplifying the situation -- I'm not mentioning who had the land first, how recently each group held the land, who took the land from whom, how long the peoples have been subjugated, etc. But the point is that these are two groups of "have nots" who suffer from PTSD, with all the mistrust, paranoia, and insecurity that this entails, and neither feels that they can afford to be the one to make the next concession. So the Conflict seems endless, and the participants seem hopelessly paralyzed about doing anything about it.

With this conflict, everyone who enters the fray will subject themselves to criticism. Either you are accused of being a one-sided partisan for the "wrong" side, or you are accused of the sin of "moral equivalency" when you try either to criticize or praise each side. No matter -- for me, I would rather be accused of the moral equivalency sin than disrespect the compelling claim that EITHER of these peoples have to this land.

The best thing a person who is new to the Conflict can do is listen to the stories of those who love this land and feel tied to it. If you find yourself unable to hear one story or the other, that's OK; it means you have been listening, and what you're learning rubs up against your pre-conceived notions. You see, this conflict causes cognitive dissonance in every pore of an intelligent listener because it is heart-breaking to hear only one narrative spoken at a time, and that is usually all you are privileged to hear. But keep listening. Allow yourself to sympathize with the story tellers. Fight through the temptation to yell at them for their biases. Everyone involved is biased, you see. It's a bias born out of love for one's tribe, for the Land, for justice, freedom, and for all we hold dear. The hate that spills over is a by-product, not the ultimate cause of their passion.

It's an old cliché, but it's true: there really is something special about that region. I felt it when I first traveled there at the age of 20. You feel that life is somehow more meaningful, and the domain of spirituality and, for many, religion, grows in importance. Those who tell you that this dispute is all about politics, not about religion, are just giving you propaganda. It is difficult for many of us to think about our faiths without thinking about this land, and we bristle at agreeing to any solution that would unjustly treat our faith tradition. That, my friends, is a problem, because perfect justice and peace do not tend to go together. The path of peace is the path of compromise, and the path of compromise always takes into account the power relations on the ground.

Anyone who is thinking about dipping their toes in this arena for the first time should know this: nothing feels more spiritually fulfilling than trying to make peace in the Holy Land. You may spend most of your time feeling like Sisyphus, but you know you're doing the work of Abraham. Speaking personally, I haven't learned yet how to be a Jewish adult without caring about trying to bring peace to this region. The idea that there are people suffering so that we Jews can have our own state is more than I can bear. Then again, the idea that there are people having their own state when we Jews cannot is also unbearable.

So, I want my cake and to eat it. I want to see my Jewish brothers and sisters, and my Palestinian cousins, know what it is like to be autonomous and secure. I know that probably won't happen during my lifetime. But by listening to each other's stories and embracing those who are willing to be embraced, at least we who are alive today can help bring that day a bit closer. We can also be assured that the day at issue will be among the greatest days in the history of our species.

Earlier on May 20 --

It is said that Biden should be focusing more on Israel and Palestine – making it clear to Bibi that Israel should (a) de-escalate, (b) stop building those damned Settlements, and (c) come to the table and hammer out a two-state solution. Agreed!

But what about AOC, Talib, Omar and their other handful of fellow travelers in Congress? Shouldn't they be publicly making a strong appeal to the Palestinians – bringing them to the table, taking them to task for not re-assuring the Israelis that they aren't trying to threaten Israel's right to exist as a majority Jewish state?

Well, they're not doing that. Instead, AOC and her peeps are issuing the typical hard-left anti-Israel broadsides, and now they are adding a resolution that would block a sale of bombs to Israel. It's a resolution that will be supported by no more than a few percent of Congress, but I guess that number doesn't matter. What matters is that AOC and company stay pure to the Palestinian cause.

My question is, exactly what is that cause? What does the “progressive” caucus of our Congress think they are accomplishing by never trying to publicly push the Palestinians toward the negotiating table and only pushing back on Israel? Exactly what “progress” are they trying to make? From where I'm sitting, the combination of a Boycott, Divest and Sanction (BDS) movement against Israel (which AOC and company generally supports), rocket fire from Gaza,

and rioting in central Israel will only further convince mainstream Israelis that Jews and Palestinians cannot co-exist together. I'm already hearing more and more buyer's remorse about the Israeli decision to give up all the Settlements in Gaza. How is the current strategy likely to make the Israelis want to stop building out Settlements in the West Bank? Won't it just motivate them to seize more land for themselves, thinking that wherever Palestinians control land in the region is just another potential military base to be used against Israel?

Folks on the hard left love to talk about "proportionality" – meaning that Israel has a disproportionate amount of military power and that leads to ugly consequences. But what about the lack of proportionality when it comes to having voices on each side of the divide who are publicly lecturing the extremists on THAT side? There are plenty of Jews and Israeli allies who are publicly lecturing Israel to pull back from their right-wing tendencies and create two states for two peoples. Who are the voices on the Palestinian side who have the courage to suggest to the Palestinians, publicly as well as privately, to adopt a strategy that is likely to result in peace, and not more militarism from Israel?

If you think the outcome of this is a single state from the River to Sea where former Hamas supporters and Netanyahu supporters bring their kids to soccer games together and sing "Salaam, Shalom," that's fine. But what is your strategy for getting there? Bombs, BDS and bile against the Jewish State? Somehow, I'm missing the logic.

May 19 –

Every day during this latest round of fighting in the Holy Land, I wake up with another bee in my bonnet. Usually, it's because of frustration with the anti-Israel left -- especially the idea that it somehow benefits the Palestinians to try to de-legitimize the very existence of Israel as a Jewish State. This only encourages the Palestinians to continue to fight the notion of a two-state solution and proclaim that solution "dead" whenever someone raises it as a possibility. (I suspect that whether I lived another 30 years or 300 years, we won't see the Jewish majority in Israel voluntarily give up their state to create yet another primarily Arab nation in the world -- as if to say that one (primarily) Jewish state and 21 Arab states is worse than a ratio of 0 and 22, respectively.)

Today, though, I am mostly concerned about the pro-Israel side of the equation. Specifically, the roll of inertia and complacency in causing Israelis and their partisans to avoid making gestures that are legitimately pro-peace. Say what you want about the gulf between the Palestinians and the uber-nationalist Israeli right-wingers; both groups have something in common. They want dramatic change! The Palestinians want the Israelis to allow them to immigrate in large numbers to pre-67 Israel, even if this puts at risk the Jewish majority of Israel. And the uber-nationalist Israeli right wingers want to so dramatically colonize the West Bank that they would effectively force the Palestinians to leave and emigrate to places like Jordan. Neither of these changes would be easy to implement. The latter one would be easier, but it would still involve a lot of bloodshed in the interim (not to mention inequity), and bloodshed on both sides of the divide.

Now add to the equation a third group: the Jewish Israelis who are not right-wing uber nationalists. Many are progressives who do want change (such as a two-state solution). But many others, maybe even most others, are people who might in theory be amenable to a two-state

solution, but that would require that they look at the Palestinians as trusted, reliable partners in such a venture -- and they don't. Consequently, their attitude about the situation is, "Look. It's not ideal. But it's as good as we're going to get, given who we're dealing with. So we might as well just get on with our lives, not worry about ultimate "solutions" to the problem, and fight the terrorists when we have to."

Here's what is creepy about that: it is awfully hard to get in the way of inertia and complacency. If you think something ain't broke, you're going to have little patience for dialogue about how to fix it. And you're not going to try to fix it unless someone can provide a fix that is virtually sure to work. In the case of any bold solution to this problem, how can there possibly be a "fix" that is virtually sure to work? Consequently, the Conflict figures to go on and on, more or less as it has in the past -- with the group primarily in power (the Israelis) having little motivation to make any substantial changes in favor of compromising.

By way of analogies, here in the USA, we have a horrible problem with the unequal distribution of wealth and income, and everyone knows it. But damned if we can do anything about it. Why? Because the powers-that-be are doing just fine, thank you, and they control the prospects for change. Typically, change happens when the critical mass of people feel the need for it in the gut. The critical mass of Israeli Jews, for the reasons set forth above, don't feel that need, notwithstanding all the reasons why they might.

And so, the Conflict continues, seemingly endlessly. And people like me -- pro-Israeli, but also pro-concession -- think about how we can possibly motivate Israeli Jews to feel the need to make those dramatic concessions, without endangering Israel's right to exist as a Jewish State. It's not easy, to say the least.

May 18 --

For the past couple of days, I have wanted to post on the topic of Israel and Palestine but until now, I have stopped myself. Almost anything I say will (a) reveal a bias of my own, (b) reveal frustration with one-sided thinkers who don't reflect intellectual humility in the way they communicate, and (c) show what can happen when you live with your head more than your heart (one of my curses). So maybe I'll just remind everyone to envision a just and secure peace, and then to remember that whatever that vision was, others have different ones. We still have to arrive at a common solution despite those different visions.

For now, here in the DC Area, we are about to have a heck of a respite from the events in the Holy Land. We will be able to walk down the street, look down, and inevitably see one of nature's great treats -- the 17-year cicada. Having been thinking too much about the Israel/Palestine situation (and the memes that are associated with it), I warned my wife during tonight's walk not to step on the few bugs that are now appearing. For it is written -- to save one cicada's life is like to save a whole world; and to take one cicada's life....

Well, you know the rest. We practice this ethic with cicadas and when we go to the grocery store deciding what food to buy. Then, we can apply the fruits of our practice when it comes to the

way we treat our fellow human beings. Gently. Respectfully. Lovingly. Humbly. Mostly, humbly.

May 16 –

It was an honor this afternoon to be able to read aloud to the attendees at the vigil in front of the Israeli Embassy the following statement from twelve Jewish U.S. Members of Congress. I would love the world's 1.8 billion Muslims to know that a dozen powerful Jewish-American politicians endorsed the following, fundamentally humane, statement.

"Dear President Biden,

"As Jewish Members of Congress, we unequivocally condemn the abhorrent rocket attacks being launched by Hamas and other terrorist groups against innocent Israeli citizens. There can be no justification for indiscriminate acts of terrorism, and we support Israel's right to defend its citizens against such violence. We grieve for the Israeli lives lost to these attacks and wish a speedy recovery for those injured.

"We are also horrified by the loss of dozens of Palestinian civilian lives in Gaza, accompanied by many more wounded and considerable damage to residential and other structures. The Palestinians should know that the American people value their lives as we do Israeli lives, and recognize that they too have the right to live in safety, free from fear.

"With more lives being lost each day, the United States cannot simply hope and wait for the situation to improve. The Biden Administration must urge an immediate ceasefire and lead efforts to facilitate de-escalation. American engagement, action and leadership are needed now to stop the pain and suffering of both Israelis and Palestinians.

"We also remain deeply concerned by the violence in Jerusalem, including Israeli police violence, which preceded these attacks. We urge all parties to exercise restraint and encourage the Israeli government to permanently halt the unjust eviction of Palestinian families from their homes in East Jerusalem.

"We firmly believe that the violence we are seeing this month, which exceeds previous recent outbreaks of hostilities in terms of its intensity and is spilling over into horrible inter-communal violence within the State of Israel, can only be permanently addressed by resolving the underlying Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a negotiated two-state solution agreed between the parties.

"The events of recent days show all too starkly what happens when the conflict, deepening occupation and incitement go inadequately addressed by consistent and creative diplomatic engagement."

Signatories: Jerrold Nadler, Jamie Raskin, Jan Schakowsky, Suzanne Bonamici, David Cicilline, Kim Schrier, Sara Jacobs, Steve Cohen, Dean Phillips, Alan Lowenthal, Andy Levin, and John Yarmuth.

Well put, ladies and gentlemen.

Earlier on May 16th –

I will be going to a vigil at the Israeli Embassy today for four reasons: (1) To support the organizers, who are my friends, (2) To pray for an end to the fighting, (3) To make a statement to the Israeli Government that they need to get out of the West Bank and work for a two-state solution rather than publicly blaming the impasse on the Palestinians and privately talking like they (greedily) just want all the Land, and (4) To make a statement to American politicians and media that they need to “put resolving this Conflict on the front burner where it belongs and to keep it there. We cannot afford to treat this simply as ‘their’ problem – for as long as our brothers, sisters and cousins are enmeshed in hatred, mistrust and violence in a land that is especially holy to us all, this problem is squarely ours as well.” (That last quote is from the JIDS statement released on Thursday.)

I am going to the vigil, however, notwithstanding my annoyance at many of the arguments that are circulating these days on social media – and among many of my friends. Here are the arguments I’m referencing as annoying (and counter-productive):

1. Israel always uses disproportionate force in fighting with the Palestinians.

My response: Of course they do. They are militarily stronger. That’s what the stronger powers do in wars, at least if the wars involve homo sapiens who are real and not characters in movies. We Americans use FAR more disproportionate force when we fight countries overseas than Israel uses when they get bombed at home. In fact, if we were getting bombed here in Washington, I can only imagine how many of our leaders would advocate carpet bombing in response. In short, at least in the past, Israel has generally been far more restrained than I suspect most powers with disproportionately more military strength would be if they were facing the indiscriminate bombing of their civilians by a weaker power.

2. The two-state solution is dead. The alternatives are either one-state democracy or one-state apartheid.

My response: The next time you hear someone declare the two-state solution dead, tell them you’re on to their rhetoric. All they’re saying is, “I don’t want a two-state solution.” Almost all the Palestinians I’ve met oppose it – meaning it’s not what they want, and they don’t argue passionately for it even under the present circumstances, which is that they are powerless to implement their preferred one-state solution. As for the Jews who oppose a two-state solution, most think that the whole idea of a “nation-state” is offensive – but isn’t that what most states are in this non-utopian world of ours? Why are the English, French, Germans, Chinese, and yes, Arabs, entitled to their states but not the Jews? The truth is that the Israeli Government kicked Jewish Settlers out of Gaza, and if they don’t want the Settlers in the West Bank they can either tell them to get out or tell them that they will be living under Palestinian rule if they won’t leave. The two-state solution is anything but dead. Unfortunately, neither is the use of thinly-biased rhetoric on the part of its opponents.

3. It is unfair for America to keep showing a preference in favor of the Israelis. We as Americans need to fight such a preference for the sake of balance.

My response: Remember 1975, when the Jewish Settlements were still in their fledgling phase? At that point, the UN held a vote on the following resolution, “Determines that Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination.” And the Ayes exceeded the Nays by over 2-1. That is what can be expected when the vote is taking place on a planet with more than 100 Muslims to every 1 Jew – a ratio that, of course, is the result of genocide and centuries of anti-Semitic abuses.

Thankfully, the USA provides a little balance to the reflexively pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel views that so many on this planet hold purely because of tribalism. Those who don’t admit that are either myopic or disingenuous.

4. The Israelis have the military upper hand, so they are the ones we need to push on – they are the ones who have the power to make peace, not the Palestinians.

My response – There is some truth to this, in that (a) the Israelis have the military upper hand, and (b) they are the ones who have the greater power to make peace. But it’s the rest of the sentence – the part about how the Israelis (and only the Israelis) are the ones we need to push on that is so problematic. An argument could be made, in fact, that because the Israelis have the upper hand, they lack the motivation to make concessions UNLESS the Palestinians make the first move to show that they can be trusted as a partner for peace (which would include figuring out a way to control their own extremists and their extremists’ allies, like Iran). In truth, peace won’t happen until the peacemakers who sympathize more with one particular side push that side toward critical concessions at the same time that is happening on BOTH sides of the divide. So it is fine for any of us to say, “My job is to lean on the Israeli side to make the necessary compromises,” but if they don’t see that happening with their primarily pro-Palestinian counterparts, their efforts aren’t likely to get anywhere.

May 15 –

Spinoza began his Political Treatise as follows:

“Philosophers conceive the affects by which we’re torn as vices, which men fall into by their own fault. That’s why they usually laugh at them, weep over them, censure them, or (if they want to seem particularly holy) curse them. They believe they perform a godly act and reach the pinnacle of wisdom when they’ve learned how to praise in many ways a human nature which doesn’t exist anywhere, and how to bewail the way men really are. They conceive men not as they are, but as they want them to be. That’s why for the most part they’ve written Satire instead of Ethics, and why they’ve never conceived a Politics which could be put to any practical application, but only one which would be thought a Fantasy, possible only in Utopia, or in the golden age of the Poets, where there’d be absolutely no need for it. In all the sciences which have a practical application, Theory is believed to be out of harmony with Practice. But this is especially true in Politics. No men are thought less suitable to guide Public Affairs than Theorists, or Philosophers.”

I provide this 17th century wisdom this morning because when it comes to Israel and Palestine, everyone seems to be a philosopher, and most are of the dogmatic variety. We pick a vision of peace, and we stick to it like a dog with a bone. As for the visions themselves, there are essentially three of them: (1) the two-state solution, where pre-48 Palestine is partitioned into a primarily Jewish and a primarily Palestinian state, (2) the so-called “left-wing” one-state solution, in which everyone in the Land lives together in a state of complete equality, and which in 50 or 100 years will probably be primarily Arab due to the region’s demographics, and (3) the so-called “right-wing” one-state solution, in which the only “Palestinian” state would be the country now known as Jordan, to which the Palestinians would be encouraged to emigrate.

Once we select our preferred vision, we then vilify whichever individuals or movements are responsible for preventing that vision from coming to fruition. Notably, our vision of peace isn’t necessarily based on what the people in the Land claim to prefer, or claim to be willing to accept, but rather it is based on what we think people OUGHT to be. In short, we think like utopians (idealists), we envision that utopia, and then we proclaim that this is the only realistic vision of peace and all the others are “dead.” That is the customary way armchair philosophers communicate about this region.

Well, as much I enjoy the role of armchair philosopher, let me try to learn from Spinoza and step back from that pastime. Instead of philosophy, let’s look at some empirical facts to ascertain what we know about the Israelis and Palestinians as they are, and not as we want them to be.

I want to know what the polls say – specifically, respected polls of the Palestinians and Israelis about which of the three above-referenced visions of peace they would (a) prefer and (b) accept. I truly don’t know the results of any such polls, but perhaps some of you do. If it turns out that a majority or near majority of the Israelis and Palestinians are willing to accept the left-wing one-state solution, then maybe folks like me (two staters) should be a bit humbler when writing off that alternative, whether we like it or not. And the same goes for a two-state solution – if people on both sides say that is acceptable to them, maybe one-staters shouldn’t be so glib about proclaiming it “dead” just because settlements may exist that would have to be uprooted or abandoned. We would-be peacemakers must seize on those poll numbers, whatever they are, to help inform us about what solutions are potentially realistic, rather than what we as utopians may prefer. If we don’t, you see, there will be only two alternatives -- the right-wing one-state solution (which, of course, no Palestinian in the universe would accept, let alone prefer) and the status quo. Personally, I’d hate to consider either of those as the answer here. But if we don’t open our eyes to which of the alternatives pass Spinoza’s test of realism, those would be the only options available.

May 13 –

This was the statement I sent out this evening to the roughly 1100 Jews, Muslims and Allies who are on the JIDS email distribution list:

From the Board of the Jewish-Islamic Dialogue Society of Washington (JIDS):

When JIDS formed at the end of 2008, one of our goals was to bring Jews and Muslims together into a big Abrahamic tent so we can better understand each other’s perspectives on the Middle

East and work towards a time when our communities will never again see each other as adversaries. During our formative years, many of us were excited at the prospects for Middle East peace and joined groups devoted entirely to that topic. We took pride in the fact that members of JIDS brought to those peace groups a certain patience and willingness to listen – we kept working at it, when others simply got frustrated and gave up. Over the past 12 years, as the Middle East Peace movement has lost its steam in the face of rising pessimism, JIDS has continued periodically to return to the topic – hosting, for example, a discussion about the Gaza War of 2014 while it was still going on, or a trip to the Palestinian Museum in D.C. shortly after it opened, or countless dialogues about visions of peace. We continue to recognize that JIDS is a big tent on this topic – some of us are One-Staters on the left, others are One-Staters on the right, and others are Two-Staters. But we have in common a heartfelt concern about the region and an unwillingness ever to give up on the prospects of a just and secure peace. JIDS strives to be a model of friendship and alliance among Jews, Muslims, Christians and those of other faiths demonstrating how we need not always agree in order to treat each other with mutual respect and to live in peace.

While we at JIDS have been engrossed in studying polarization in American politics, the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians may present the most polarizing social context known to our species. We have no answers that will satisfy those who subscribe exclusively to either the Jewish or the Palestinian narrative. But we can promise that we will continue to study the Conflict, pray for the end of the Conflict, and work as individuals towards a solution that dignifies those who live in the region. As Americans, we call for our government and media institutions to put resolving this Conflict on the front burner where it belongs and to keep it there. We cannot afford to treat this simply as “their” problem – for as long as our brothers, sisters and cousins are enmeshed in hatred, mistrust and violence in a land that is especially holy to us all, this problem is squarely ours as well.

Earlier on May 13 –

Point/counter-point:

Says the advocate of the Palestinian cause: You Israelis love to point out that after the UN gave you Israel and a proposal was made to partition the Land so that you’d have little more than half of it, you agreed and the Palestinians didn’t. Then, two decades later, when you assumed power and residency over the vast majority of the Land, leaving only the relatively small West Bank and Gaza Strip to the Palestinians, one would think you would say, “Enough!” or to use your Passover term, “Dayenu!” But no – over the past five decades, one of your governments after another has seized more and more land for yourselves, as if to say, “we won’t be satisfied until all of you are either ghettoized in the tiny Gaza Strip or have moved across the River Jordan.” How can you act so imperialistically, so greedily, and still boast about how you were willing to accept the proposed partition when your state was founded?

Says the advocate of the Israeli cause: You Palestinians love to say that Israel has a choice: democracy or apartheid. You talk about how a Jewish State could only be compatible with democracy if we accepted a two-state solution, and yet you quickly add that the Israelis have murdered that option by building more and more settlements. And now, you conclude, the only

options are one-state – either a single democratic state or a single apartheid state. Yet if we look at the recent past, the Palestinian Authority called a democratic election for the Palestinian people, only to cancel it. Why? Because they didn't like the possible outcome. So, it would appear that YOU are the ones who oppose democracy, not us. We at least hold elections. All you do is offer criticism, hypocritically charging us with sins that apply to yourselves, not us. How can we agree to make massive concessions to you and see you as a trustworthy partner for peace if you can't even hold a simple election?

Says I: When will we get to the roots of the problem? It's not the fighting that is taking place today, or seven years ago, or during the First and Second Intifadas. The problem won't be solved merely by stopping the latest round of violence. The battle will stop, but the war will continue. The roots of the problem are that these are two peoples don't think, they KNOW, that they themselves have the superior claim to the land. And not only are they certain of the supreme righteousness of their cause, but they are equally mistrustful of the other side. Accordingly, neither seems to think that compromising – even if it involves partial compromises – is in their long-term interest. Neither, you see, wants to show weakness, or to give up any of their potential leverage. How do we change all this? To begin, those outside of the region must try to be relatively even-handed, and not encourage the polarization in the region. But this war won't end until we see enough leaders inside the region ON BOTH SIDES who are willing to trust, who are willing to compromise, and – sadly – who are willing to risk their own lives to make peace with their fellow Semites.

May 12 –

In Israel and Palestine, we have rounds of violence -- or to be more specific, cycles in which the relative calm is interrupted by violence and/or provocations that beget more violence, then additional violence, etc. While the violence is going on, it is difficult to focus on anything other than trying to stop it, or lamenting it.

But the deeper story, the more ultimately damaging story, is that each round of violence is but a battle in a never-ending war, and the war doesn't end because both sides knows in their heart that justice is on their side. Both sides are obsessed with justice, you see. Perfect justice. And there will be no peace until justice is served.

The curse of the Middle East is the quest for perfect justice. Justice for two peoples who are historical victims of discrimination and abuse. Justice for two peoples who the world has forsaken time and time again. There must be justice.

And so there must be war. It is the legacy that will be passed from generation to generation to generation until someday, hopefully, these two peoples will convince themselves at the same time that there are ultimate values other than justice. And peace is one of them.

For now, however, let the march continue: No justice, no peace. No justice, no peace. We're right, they're wrong. No justice, no peace. And so it goes.

May 10 –

Who is thinking about the Israelis and the Palestinians tonight? Whose heart is breaking at the thought of a never-ending war in a place commonly known as the "Holy Land." Who would like to see the American media pay special attention to the events there? As my non-Zionist friends would say, America pays a ton of money to Israel; doesn't that mean we should have a special interest in thinking about the region when it is at war? As a Zionist, I admittedly have an interest in thinking about the region -- and that interest turns to depression when I consider how far we are from peace and mutual trust.

For decades, America's official position was that we support a two-state solution. Now, from what I can tell, America is throwing up its hands at that prospect, since neither the Israeli or Palestinian leaders seem to be pining for it. So what does that mean? Checkmate -- make the place a living hell for the weaker group so that they will walk a trail of tears across the Jordan? Stalemate -- i.e., intermittent rounds of hot and cold wars between two peoples who will never give up the fight? Or is there a third alternative to two states that I'm simply too dumb or biased to envision (and yes, I've heard people try to explain one many times and it never sounds realistic to me)?

Either way, this is a topic worth talking, thinking, praying and even crying about, and infinitely more interesting than watching political hacks repeat themselves for the 1000th time about the plight of the Republicans or about that guy in Florida.