



MEI Bulletin

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MEI Focuses on the Peace Process

New developments in the region continue to provide analysts and ambassadors with much to contemplate — a peace deal between the government of Yemen and the Huthi rebels, a new American Ambassador to Syria, arrests of military leaders in Turkey, and the capture of key Taliban leaders in Afghanistan, just to name a few. One long-standing issue, however, that continues to occupy policymakers is the Arab-Israeli peace process. A general lack of progress combined with catastrophic events in other parts of the world has shifted attention away from this critical issue.

journalist covering international politics, including four years in Jerusalem as *The New York Times*' correspondent there. Also in this issue, Scholars Paul Scham and Dr. Ilan Peleg are interviewed by Dr. Michael Collins Dunn of *The Middle East Journal* in a preview of their upcoming article about the past and future of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

For even more reading on the issue, a recent MEI *Policy Brief* by *Exploration and Production* editor Adam Green discusses the potential for “economic peace,” and asks whether recent economic growth in the West Bank can be sustained in the current



A Palestinian boy stands in his family's olive tree grove near Nablus, as an Israeli settlement sits on the hill behind him. (Photo: flickr user michaelramallah)

Phil Wilcox, President of the Foundation for Middle East Peace, offers two views of the future of peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians in his introduction to this issue of the *Bulletin*. One is a pessimistic view based on a belief among some circles that Israel's settlement activity is reaching a point of no return in regards to final status negotiations. A second outlook is more positive and argues that the current situation is simply untenable and must be addressed out of necessity. Regardless of the outlook, Ambassador Wilcox believes that the time is right and the need is great for a major American initiative in the peace process.

Sharing a personal perspective of the conflict is MEI Scholar Greg Myre, who spent his career as a

political climate. This *Policy Brief* and many others can be read on our website, www.mei.edu. Dr. Gonul Tol, the Director of the Center for Turkish Studies at MEI, recently launched MEI's newest publication, called *Policy Insights*, with an analysis of current tensions between Turkey and Israel. These tensions could of course strongly influence the shape of future peace process negotiations. *Policy Insights* also can be found on our website.

So much has happened at the Institute in just the first months of the new year, including the addition of two new scholars: Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar and Charles Dunne. Mr. Tabaar joins our team of Iran experts. He is an Adjunct Professor at George Washington University's Elliott School of Interna-

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tional Affairs, as well as a journalist with the BBC World Service. He brings to us a deep knowledge of religious and social forces in Iran, including the Green Movement, and much more. Charles Dunne has a wealth of experience related to Iraq and other Middle East issues. Most recently he was the Foreign Policy Advisor to the Strategic Plans and Policy Director of the Pentagon Joint Staff and prior to that was the Director for Iraq on the National Security Council. We are thrilled to have their vast expertise with us at the Institute.

We are distributing the expertise of our scholars, transcripts of our events, and our many original publications by email, and I encourage you to sign up for these mailings on our website. It's the best way to keep up with our new publications and upcoming events at MEI, and there is so much more to come.

—Wendy Chamberlin

Israel and Palestine: Peace or Perpetual Conflict?

Has the 100-year-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict become “irreversible” because of decades of Israeli occupation and settlement in the West Bank and East Jerusalem? Or is there still a realistic possibility that strong US diplomatic leadership can revitalize Israeli and Palestinian support for peace and lead the two adversaries to a mutually agreed upon two-state partition with two capitals in Jerusalem?

Many analysts are predicting with growing urgency that Israel's 40-year settlement project in the West Bank and East Jerusalem is reaching the point of no return. They argue that it may be too late to reverse Israeli control of these areas. Since neither the United States nor the international community has shown the capacity to intervene effectively, Israel will soon become a *de facto* binational state, destroying any prospect for a two-state peace and assuring continued violence.

A more positive thesis is that it is not too late for a two-state solution because continued Israeli domination is unsustainable and strong, wise American diplomacy could transform the situation. Ultimately, neither the Israeli people, the US government, American Jews, nor the international community are likely to acquiesce to Israeli policies that will doom the Zionist goal of a Jewish, democratic state, postpone indefinitely Palestinian national aspirations, and threaten American security.

The “Irreversibility” Argument

The irreversibility thesis is based upon the “facts on the ground” that Israel has created over the past 40 years while the United States and the international community stood by. Today there are 300,000 Israeli settlers in 130 West Bank settlements and about 100 “outposts,” along with 200,000 settlers in East Jerusalem. Israel continues to expand a vast infrastructure of walls, barriers, checkpoints, and settler-only roads to protect settlers and ensure permanent Israeli control.

The direction of Israeli politics is another reason for pessimism. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition is dominated by ideological and religious parties who are dedicated to a “Greater Israel.” Settler interests are entrenched in critical sectors of Israel's civilian bureaucracy. And supporters of continued settlement and Israeli control of the West Bank are a growing element in Israel's military and security services.

Netanyahu pays only lip service to two states, having accepted only a temporary, superficial freeze of settlements. He and his coalition partners oppose the massive transformation of the territorial *status quo* that would meet the minimal needs of the Palestinians for sovereignty in the West Bank, much less a capital in East Jerusalem. Even if Netanyahu and his inner circle grasp the need for major change, they are unlikely to challenge their more extreme colleagues and risk their coalition.

Israel's liberal and center-left politicians, who support two states and the need for major compromise, are a dispir-



A checkpoint in the West Bank. (Photo: flickr user michaelramallah)

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ited minority. Although polls reflect popular disillusionment over settlements, most Israelis are deeply skeptical that peace is possible. The separation barrier and the closure of Gaza have eliminated most contact between Israelis and Palestinians, and the end of major Palestinian violence has persuaded many Israelis that the Palestinians have been subdued. Most Israelis are ignorant of the realities of the occupation, and a compliant, patriotic media — with some exceptions — supports the official line. All these factors weigh against any self-generated internal political change that would oblige Israel's leaders to evacuate settlements, divide the land, and make peace.

As for the Palestinians, their leaders have lacked strength and vision, with the exception of the current Palestinian Authority (PA) Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. Fatah's leaders in the West Bank and their Hamas rivals in Gaza have compounded Palestinian weakness by pursuing rivalry rather than national priorities. Even if Israel were disposed to compromise, it would still face a divided Palestinian partner.

Finally, many believe that the United States is not prepared to change Israeli policies through more forceful diplomacy, especially after President Obama's admission that he had underestimated the difficulties of making peace and may have raised expectations too high. Netanyahu may well take this as a signal, especially after defeating Obama's demand for a settlement freeze, that Israel need not fear more aggressive American diplomacy. Thus, skeptics predict that a truly transformational diplomatic effort by the United States is unlikely, and the conflict will continue with destructive consequences for all concerned.

A More Hopeful Scenario



Jerusalem. (Photo: flickr user mockstar)

In contrast to the irreversibility thesis, a compelling case can be made that peace is possible and not just as a naïve hope. The *status quo* is historically untenable. Israel's effort to dominate and control a looming majority of Palestinians is unrealistic and violates all modern international norms. Many Israelis understand this, and most Palestinians want to restore internal unity and make peace. Israeli, Palestinian, and American polls show strong support for greater US leadership. It is quite possible therefore that a full blown American peace initiative, as opposed to current efforts to push the parties themselves into negotiations, would break the paralysis of Israeli and Palestinian politics if pursued with

strength, compassion, and persistence. By reviving hope, such an initiative could mobilize popular majorities for peace on both sides and oblige their leaders to adopt new policies.

Although Israelis doubt that peace is possible, they are acutely aware that the Jewish and democratic character of their state is in danger. It is remarkable that two pillars of the Zionist establishment, former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and the current Minister of Defense Ehud Barak, have said publicly that if Israel cannot reach a two-state peace with the Palestinians, it will become a binational or an "apartheid" state. Could Olmert and Barak be signaling to Washington that Israel needs more determined American help to rescue it from a disastrous future? On the Palestinian side, a concrete vision of peace backed by the United States would be a powerful incentive to abandon the Fatah-Hamas quarrel and to make the necessary compromises for a two-state peace.

Many Israelis recognize that settlement and occupation are corrupting Israel's institutions, mortgaging its future, and alienating the world. Whatever their politics, most also know that Israel is a small state that depends heavily on the support and goodwill of the United States. They realize that no Israeli leader can defy for long a determined American President with a good faith peace plan that protects Israel's fundamental interests.

Support for Israel is profound among American Jews. They are increasingly concerned that Israel's policies endanger its future. Traditional Jewish groups still discourage American pressure on Israel to make major compromises. But the rise of progressive Jewish organizations, like J Street and Americans for Peace Now, as well as polls, suggest that a majority of American Jews would welcome a more assertive American policy out of concern for the future of Israel, Jewish values, and American interests.

All the above suggest that the time is right for a major American final status peace initiative. Such a plan would go beyond the Obama Administration's current low key effort to persuade Israeli and Palestinian leaders to

negotiate peace. It would offer a bold American vision of peace based on formulas for resolving final status issues that are already well known and widely accepted in theory. By offering this and demonstrating unwavering support to make it happen, the President could mobilize not only public support in Israel and Palestine, but a large domestic constituency with a strong core of Jewish, Christians, Muslim, and Arab Americans. The international community and the Arab world also would rally to support such American leadership.

Today, it is not yet clear whether President Obama, given his administration's many challenges and his disappointing first year of Middle East peace diplomacy, is still prepared to do what is necessary to break the Israeli-Palestinian deadlock and make peace. The President and his team often have described this conflict correctly as a challenge to American national security. The need, therefore, is for a new, more assertive policy that applies American influence more boldly to protect US interests and to rescue Israelis and Palestinians from a grim future.

— Philip C. Wilcox, Jr. is a Scholar at the Middle East Institute and is President of the Foundation for Middle East Peace.

Meet the Scholars: Greg Myre

Greg Myre served as *The New York Times* correspondent in Jerusalem from 2003 to 2007, covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the 2006 Israel-Hizbullah war, the rise of Hamas, and Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Prior to that assignment, he was the Associated Press (AP) correspondent in Jerusalem from 2000 to 2003. He also was based in Cyprus, Pakistan, Russia, and South Africa, covering such diverse events as Benazir Bhutto's government in Pakistan, the civil war in Afghanistan, the 1991 Gulf War, and the collapse of apartheid in South Africa. Currently, he is an MEI Scholar and a Senior Editor for "Morning Edition" on National Public Radio.



Greg Myre

Although you graduated from Yale with a degree in American Studies, you have since specialized in the Middle East. Did you ever foresee yourself focusing on this region, and is there anything in particular that drew you to covering the Middle East?

When I got out of college I knew I wanted to be a journalist, and I started here in Washington with the AP. But I figured out very quickly that I wanted to go overseas. It just sounded fun and exciting, and I wanted to go someplace that was filled with great adventure. My first assignment was in South Africa in 1987 with the AP, which was a very dynamic time there. There was a state of emergency and apartheid was still in force, although it was beginning to show its first cracks. I got my first taste of the Middle East in 1991 with the Gulf War. I was sent from South Africa to help out with the AP's coverage. When the war began, I went to Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, and after the war was over I went to Kuwait for close to three months. I was fascinated with the region. I kept being drawn to the Middle East because it produces so much news. Perhaps for the people living there, it would be better if there was a little less news, but as a journalist, I kept feeling the pull to go back.

Was there anything about reporting from the Middle East, and specifically on the Arab-Israeli conflict, that was substantially different than working in any other region or country?

Jerusalem was a great place to be a journalist because the Palestinians and the Israelis love to talk, and sadly, they are often fighting. One way or another, the people there are generating news every day. Both sides are incredibly accessible. Every place you go, you develop contacts, but it can take time. In Russia, it was particularly challenging to get people to return phone calls. In Israel, you'd meet somebody, and they'd just give you their cell phone number. Then they would call you. There were plenty of times, with both Israelis and Palestinians, when a story would be breaking, and instead of making phone calls myself, I would have to turn off my phone because I'd be getting bombarded with calls from various officials and others who wanted to be quoted. Both sides were very experienced in dealing with media, and they wanted to have their story told, so they were constantly calling you. That was really the most distinctive feature of covering the Israelis and Palestinians.

If you're in a place like Syria, it's the reverse. There are only a limited number of officials who are authorized to speak. People in the streets are reluctant to talk to a Western journalist; they can't imagine anything good com-

ing of it and can certainly imagine something bad happening. So parts of the Middle East are great to work in; others can be more challenging. The Pakistanis were very open and willing to talk. I loved, for example, working in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s. There was no electricity, no telephones, and no newspapers. The only news came from radio broadcasts. You got up in the morning and had to go out and find a story. I really enjoyed that kind of reporting.

You were stationed in Israel from 2000-2007 during the outbreak and aftermath of the Second Intifada. Are there any specific events from this time period that were especially difficult or interesting to cover?

After the Palestinian uprising broke out in 2000, the next five years was a series of non-stop events, many of them quite dramatic. You would wake up every day and not know where you would be going, but you knew there would be news somewhere. It might be the West Bank, where there was fighting going on. It might be Gaza, where the Israelis were carrying out an air strike. It could be in Jerusalem or somewhere in Israel where there was a suicide bombing. It was just this constant stream of news. It would never end. It was seven days a week and was often happening at night.



US Special Envoy George Mitchell meets with Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak in Tel Aviv in July 2009. (Photo: Ariel Hermoni, Israeli Ministry of Defense)

In March 2002, there were 16 Palestinian suicide bombings inside Israel. Literally, on average, every other day there was a bombing, and the Israelis were hitting back increasingly hard with their military, particularly in the West Bank. In the end of March, they launched a massive incursion, Operation Defensive Shield. It was a very challenging operation to cover because, all of a sudden, the rules were changing. We had to travel in armored cars. Areas were declared closed military zones, so it was always a little fuzzy whether you would be allowed to go to a certain area. Neither side was targeting you as a journalist, but it was easy to get caught in the cross-fire. We'd be in towns where Israelis had declared a curfew, driving around in our vehicle, and would tape the letters "TV" on the side. But, if you had jumpy Israeli soldiers worried about being attacked, you might be shot at accidentally. And when you were inside Israel, you were just as much a potential victim of a suicide bombing as anybody else, so you faced threats from both sides, but you also had the opportunity to talk to both sides face to face.

During your time in Israel, you also covered Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the subsequent election and civil war within the Palestinian Authority. In your view, what are the prospects for reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, and can the peace process move forward without an intra-Palestinian political reconciliation?

The prospects for reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah are not very good. Both sides have become more entrenched in their own territory, and both see the other as undermining the Palestinian project. Fatah believes negotiations with Israel are the only way to achieve a state, while Hamas says that Israel left Gaza because it fought Israel and not because of negotiations. There is a power struggle, there are ideological differences, and there are historical differences between the people of Gaza and the West Bank. In addition, they are also physically separated and cannot easily meet or communicate with one another, which tends to reinforce their differences. Israel has played off of that by saying that they will not negotiate until there is a Palestinian leadership that can deliver. The Israelis are willing to talk with Fatah and its leadership in the West Bank, including people such as Salam Fayyad, but there is the question of whether they can deliver. Can they even deliver in the West Bank, let alone the Gaza Strip? Hamas refuses to recognize or negotiate with Israel, and Israel refuses to negotiate with Hamas. The US government has pursued its own version of that policy. It's hard to see how reconciliation is going to happen. I can imagine the Palestinian factions continuing to hold periodic talks, but it looks unlikely that either side will make significant concessions in the territory it controls right now.

Recently, George Mitchell has called on both sides to return to negotiations without the full settlement freeze that both President Obama and Palestinian Authority President 'Abbas have demanded. Do you believe it was a wise strategy to call for this settlement freeze?

If you look back at the Oslo Accords of 1993, that issue was set aside. The settlements weren't dealt with when

the process began; it was something that was going to be negotiated. The Palestinians feel very burned by that. There were a little over 100,000 settlers in the West Bank in 1993 when those negotiations began. By 2000, when the talks broke down, there were right around 200,000. Now, we are looking at close to 300,000 West Bank settlers. You've seen this enormous growth in settlers, despite years of peace talks, and despite years of violence that followed. Palestinians make it very clear that this is not something they can just set aside and leave open-ended. They want it dealt with up front, rather than at the back end this time. I think the Obama Administration was trying to address that concern.

Perhaps they also were trying to find a wedge in Israeli politics. There are certainly settlers and their supporters who believe that they should keep growing. There are also plenty of Israelis who would like to see the settlements stopped and even scaled back. The problem is, if you are dealing with the settlements in isolation, it's going to be very difficult to get an Israeli leader to make a comprehensive move because Israeli governments are coalitions. It is always a distinct possibility that one faction might leave the government and bring it down over the settlement issue. So you see a very difficult situation where the Palestinians are insisting that something be done with the settlements up front, and the Israelis are not prepared to do something on settlements unless it's part of a much larger process.

You mentioned that one of the problems is competing and diverse factions in Israeli government coalitions. Do you think it's possible that this Israeli coalition can bring about peace with the Palestinians, or do you think that Prime Minister Netanyahu will spend his time trying to keep his government together?

This is obviously the challenge of every Israeli government. In its 60-year existence, Israel has had about 30 governments. No matter what an Israeli Prime Minister wants to do, whether it is expanding or contracting settlements, he faces this constant struggle of keeping his government together. Since Netanyahu ended up forming a coalition that is tilted very much to the right, any concession he makes on settlements is virtually certain to generate serious blowback from the coalition and even his own party. I think Netanyahu feels that he went about as far as he could by offering this limited settlement freeze, while the Palestinians feel that this was just a charade.

It reflects this huge chasm and shows how far backwards we've gone in the past decade. A decade ago, the Israelis and Palestinians were negotiating specifics. They were talking about how many settlers might stay in the West Bank and how many might leave. They were talking about what future borders might look like. These are the core issues. Now, you are just dealing with preliminary issues designed to get the talks moving, such as a settlement freeze or a pledge not to expand in certain areas. Any person who wants to see a peace agreement only can shake his head in disappointment, because a decade ago, these two sides were having genuine, serious talks about the fundamental issues. Now, at best, they're making some small gestures.

Currently, you are a Senior Editor for "Morning Edition" on National Public Radio. What do you find different about covering the Middle East from afar, as opposed to living in the region?

It was a lot more fun to cover it when I was there, that's for sure. I miss it; I was a foreign correspondent for 20 years, and a little over a decade was spent in the Middle East. I still suffer withdrawal pains. It is healthy, though, to see it from a distance. I think you gain some perspective. On the down side, you lose the day to day sense of the place. The knowledge and feel that you have does start to erode when you're not there talking to people every day. From afar, it's a bit harder to gauge the significance of every event. I still stay in touch. I'm still reading about the region every day and talking to people there regularly. I could certainly envision going back there for either a temporary or an extended assignment. For now, though, I'm following it from afar and making the best of that.

You have a memoir coming out later this year of your experiences reporting in the region. What was that process like for you? Did you stumble upon any forgotten anecdotes that you included in the book?

I was a reporter for almost a quarter century, and writing a book was a very different process. All those years I used to wake up and say, "I need to find a story today. I need to report that story, then write it, and all before midnight



Palestinian girls walk beside the "separation fence." (Photo: flickr user hazy genius)



An Islamic Jihad mural in Nablus. (Photo: flickr user michaelramallah)

over to his house to break the fast one evening during Ramadan. He became friendly with her and would call her. After a Hamas suicide bombing in Jerusalem, he would call and make sure that she was OK. It was such a weird juxtaposition. He was not involved in the Hamas military wing or in these attacks directly, but he was a member and supporter of the group carrying them out. Yet, he seemed very sincere in calling and asking how she was doing. Jennifer would tell him, “Well, your group set off a bomb down the street from my house today.” Even when he was arrested and held for a while, he continued to call from prison. It was a small place where everyone talks to one another, and you had these bizarre scenarios.

tonight.” When I sat down to write the book, I had something on the order of 1,500 stories during my time in Jerusalem. I found myself with an absolute wealth of material from the stories I had reported, from things I’d remembered, from notes I’d taken and never used. My wife is a television reporter. Her office had put all of her stories on DVDs, so often when I was writing about a certain event, I would look at her report and see details that I had forgotten.

There were a lot of things that you just can’t get into newspaper stories, but there is room in the book for those details that capture the strangeness of the place. My wife met a shaykh from Hamas in Bethlehem who was very kind to her. He had her

One of the other very strange things was covering the Israel-Hizbullah war in 2006. We had covered their 1996 battle from southern Lebanon, right on the border. At that time, the incoming fire was Israeli, and the outgoing fire was Hizbullah. We covered that fighting for a couple weeks, and it was clear that the cease-fire had not resolved the conflict. Sure enough, there we were ten years later, just a mile or two from where we were in the earlier war, but this time we were on the Israeli side of the border. Now the Israeli fire was outgoing, and the Hizbullah fire was incoming. We were watching what was for us an absolute repeat performance of this earlier war. In the very tip of northern Israel, in the town of Metulla, we found a safe place because it was right up against the fence that marked the border. The Hizbullah rockets were so inaccurate that they fired over the town rather than risk missing and hitting somebody on the Lebanese side. The Israelis also had their armor back from the border. For much of the war, we were in Metulla, and there was this rainbow of rockets going over our heads in both directions around the clock. Yet bizarrely, we felt relatively safe in the center of this. Again, this showed the very intimate nature of the conflict. This was a very strange situation, but it seemed also to be a metaphor for this place, this small, intimate battle that’s happening all the time there.

— Daniel Magalotti

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MEJ Authors Ilan Peleg and Paul Scham on Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations

Dr. Ilan Peleg is the Charles A. Dana Professor of Government and Law at Lafayette College and the Editor-in-Chief of the *Israel Studies Forum*. Paul Scham is Visiting Professor Israel Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park and the Executive Director of the UMD Gildenhorn Institute for Israel Studies. Their article “Historical Breakthroughs in Arab-Israeli Negotiations: Lessons for the Future” appears in the Spring 2010 issue of *The Middle East Journal*.

Is it even appropriate to talk about a peace process at this point? What steps could or should the Obama Administration take to move things forward? Would some sort of shuttle diplomacy, regional peace conference, Camp David style summit, or some other approach be practicable or even desirable at this stage?

Peleg: In many of my lectures I like to talk about the “so-called peace process”. The reason is that the parties are more interested in scoring propaganda points than actually bringing the conflict to some conclusion. The options of the Obama Administration are, therefore, limited. A shuttle diplomacy of a sort has been carried out by George Mitchell (although less intensively than the one practiced by Henry Kissinger after the 1973 war), but I am unaware of any results whatsoever. No Israeli government, and least of all Netanyahu’s, will agree to a regional, or for that matter international peace conference, believing that Israel’s advantageous power position will be more than balanced by a united Arab front. The reputation of a Camp David approach for producing a positive change has evaporated with the disastrous Camp David II of July 2000. So, the best that can be done is for the international community, including the United States and the President personally, to reaffirm their support for a negotiated settlement leading to a two-state solution. While such a declaration could not change the situation on the ground in the near future, it is not unimportant in the long run. Thus, Obama’s, Biden’s, and Clinton’s vocal and public support for a two-state solution led Netanyahu to give his Bar-Ilan speech in which he came out for a two-state solution. The pressure on the settlement issue, although not entirely productive, led to serious divides within the Israeli right.



US President Barack Obama meets with Palestinian Authority President Mahmud ‘Abbas on May 28, 2009 in the Oval Office. (Photo: Pete Souza, The White House)



President Obama, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel talk in the Oval Office on May 18, 2009. (Photo: Pete Souza, The White House)

Scham: How it starts doesn’t matter so much; it’s the American political will behind it that is most important. That said, Camp David II proved that a summit that is not fully prepared is much worse than useless. George Mitchell has been shuttling for a year, apparently with little to show for it. In my view, the only possible chance of success is for Obama himself to be visibly involved, and to push both parties further than they’re currently willing to go. Were he to do this, there would have to be a negotiating process, presumably with active American participation, that can narrow the gaps between the two parties very significantly before a summit could take place. Israel would never agree to a regional conference unless it was completely choreographed in advance.

Given existing realities, do you think there is any real prospect of the Palestinian Authority (Gaza and the West Bank or the West Bank only) holding the postponed presidential and/or parliamentary elections any time in 2010, or even 2011?

Peleg: The Palestinians ought to put their house in order if they want to see their dream, a Palestinian state in

the West Bank and Gaza, materialize. Elections are necessary to give the leadership the necessary legitimacy, but on the other hand the forthcoming elections are a recipe for non-compromising positions. Even Mahmud 'Abbas, a moderate Palestinian by any standard, has fallen into this trap. Although all non-state national movements can suffer from deep internal divisions, the Palestinians can ill-afford their divides (although they have been typical of the Palestinian national movement since the 1920s!).

Scham: I think there is a modest chance sometime in 2011. But this is tied up with what seems likely to happen. If Hamas is still frozen out of the process, it has little incentive to let the elections happen. That isn't the only factor, but there needs to be a major push — either an event or a political action — to end the stalemate. Something of the sort may well happen before the end of 2011.

Lately there has been some talk of some sort of a dramatic, game-changing move. One example is the suggestion that if Marwan Barghouti is released as part of a Gilad Shalit prisoner swap, he could provide leadership that both the West Bank and Gaza could come together on. Or on another note, there was Stephen Walt's recent suggestion in Foreign Policy that George Mitchell should resign "because he's wasting his time." Would such dramatic gestures have potential, or are we engaging in pipe dreams here?

Peleg: While Marwan Barghouti is an extremely talented politician, he is not a magician. His eventual release could provide the Palestinians with a post-'Abbas, pragmatic leadership. Ironically, Barghouti's time in an Israeli prison might give him the necessary legitimacy for the inevitable concessions (particularly in regard to the Right of Return) that he will have to make if an Israeli-Palestinian deal is ever to materialize.

By definition, we need a game-changing event for the situation to be significantly transformed. A prisoner swap potentially could be a lever for change, providing concrete evidence that negotiation could be mutually beneficial and politically productive. But the fact that a deal has not materialized is, once again, an indication that the parties are not ready for either a tactical deal, let alone a strategic breakthrough. For all we know, the Shalit deal is stuck over relatively marginal issues. Rather than using the deal for strategic purposes, the endless negotiations are used for tactical goals.



Palestinians march in 2004 on behalf of Marwan Barghouti's release from prison. (Photo: flickr user ISM-NC)

Scham: Marwan Barghouti has been proposed as the savior of the peace process for years (almost since he was first jailed in 2002), but no one really knows if he is remotely capable of transforming the situation. He might be, but then again there could be any number of reasons why he couldn't; not least of which is the likely assumption on the Palestinian street that, if released, he must have been party to a backroom deal with Israel. Even if he were to immediately take a major political role, the situation has to allow for some movement, which it now doesn't.

With all respect to Stephen Walt, I don't read Mitchell's position in the same way. Mitchell himself is presumably Obama's chief advisor on the conflict; there is no reason to believe that he is simply given his marching (or flying) orders. If Obama and his team, including Mitchell, have concluded for reasons I am not privy to that a major, forceful, strategic move by the administration is not possible, then Mitchell's resignation, threatened or real, would not change it.

That said, as noted above, I think a game-changing development has to take place for the game to change, and I don't think anyone but Obama could make a political move that might do that.

How does the Iranian nuclear issue affect the peace process, either in regard to potential Israeli actions or potential denuclearization of the region as part of a peace settlement?

Peleg: The Iranian factor is counterproductive in all possible ways. It produces an even less stable Middle East than it otherwise would have been. With the noisy "diplomacy" of Mahmud Ahmadinejad, no Israeli govern-

ment could possibly focus entirely on the Palestinian issue. Iran fosters the sense of generalized threat in Israel, a feeling that “there is no one to talk to” in the greater Middle East. The presence of Iranian allies Hamas and Hizbullah on Israel’s borders heightens this feeling. If the historical record is a valid guide, Israelis could agree to territorial concessions if they could be convinced that their security is enhanced. Thus, the Egyptian-Israeli deal of 1979 neutralized Egypt as a leading member of the anti-Israel Arab coalition while, at the same time, led to complete Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula (a position that was considered impossible only several years before). The deal was “sold” to the Israeli public as a rational choice while, at the same time, had huge psychological “returns.”

Scham: The Iranian nuclear issue is a major factor that could play out in several different ways, and can’t be ignored. First, as the Iranian bomb becomes more likely, Israel will be even less interested in a peace process with the Palestinians, because they are far less a threat than are the Iranians. Second, while I don’t think a full-scale strike on Iran by Israel and/or the US is likely, the pressures that are put on Iran, of whatever type, are likely to provoke some sort of Iranian response that, in turn, will provoke Israel, and that would likely prevent or halt a peace process. Third, in a larger sense, Israel would never dream of a comprehensive peace with a huge number of Hizbullah missiles still pointed at it, and I don’t see Hizbullah dismantling them while Iran is under threat.



Palestinian young men throw stones at Israeli soldiers in Nablus. (Photo: flickr user michaelramallah)

yahu plan does not appear to include a political component. If the Israelis were to allow that to happen without the political issues being settled first, they would unilaterally decide all disputed issues in their favor, i.e., Jerusalem, borders, refugees, security, and so forth. Israel has dared the Palestinians to declare a state unilaterally for years and the Palestinians understand what the consequences of such a declaration would be.

While there are some economic issues that can be dealt with without the political issues being solved, I don’t think this would satisfy the Palestinians, the Arab states, or any of their supporters. If Israel were to be forced, in two years, to accept resolutions it hasn’t bargained for, it could certainly prevent any “peace” from happening. So, in practice, the economic plans are simply a means of postponing dealing with the political issues that are inescapable if peace is to be achieved.

Can you address briefly the Obama and Netanyahu Administrations’ view on settlements and how they perceive their role in a peace settlement? Is there any way to move forward on the settlements issue?

Peleg: On the issue of settlements, everybody has climbed their own tree, so we find ourselves frozen in a debate on significant, but not the most important, issues. A return to a discussion of the “core issues” would have

There are undoubtedly more scenarios, but these give a sense of how the two issues are joined hip and thigh.

Neither Israel nor Iran is likely to denuclearize until they are convinced that an existential threat no longer exists. That belief is so ingrained in both societies that I can’t see that happening in the foreseeable future.

What about the whole idea of “economic peace,” the Fayyad plan, etc. Is this a fruitful route to pursue?

Peleg: While economic development is, indeed, positive (as proven in Northern Ireland and other conflicts) it is not, in and of itself, a real solution to the main issues at hand. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been, for more than 100 years, about the fundamental goals of two national movements. The conflict is about identity, not material wellbeing.

Scham: In the absence of a real — by which I mean political — process, the Fayyad plan seems the only game in town. However, the crucial difference between the Fayyad plan and Netanyahu’s hope to emphasize structures and economics, is that (more or less) the Netanyahu plan does not appear to include a political component.

been more productive. Mahmud 'Abbas demands a total freeze on Israeli settlement, a perfectly reasonable position on his part and a political *sine qua non* for his political survival. Netanyahu, on the other hand, leads one of the most right-wing governments in Israel's history, a government that cannot survive a total freeze. Obama thus finds himself in an impossible position that, tragically, does not even deal with the central issues of the historic debate. In my opinion, the only "out" is for the President to initiate a conversation in all possible forums on the core issues, challenging both parties to deal with the international consensus that have emerged on the two-state solution.

Scham: The Obama Administration apparently believed (and presumably still does) that a full, open-ended, settlement freeze, including a freeze on the "natural growth" of settlements in the West Bank and the Arab portions of East Jerusalem, is essential to peace. Since they have not been able to get Netanyahu to agree to any more than a ten-month freeze (after 3,000 housing units already scheduled are built), and not including either natural growth or Jerusalem, they have tried to move into negotiations without this as a confidence building measure. However, at least partly because of the former American insistence on a full freeze, President 'Abbas has staked his tattered credibility on a freeze as a precondition to negotiations, which is where matters have been since the fall.



Israel Defense Force troops return to Israel following Operation Cast Lead in Gaza. (Photo: flickr user Andreas H. Lunde)

However, it is not possible for the Netanyahu government to freeze settlements any more than it already has done. While it is conceivable — though highly unlikely — that Netanyahu would do so were he a free agent, he is not one at all. His very right-wing coalition partners — compared to whom he is far more moderate — would never agree. There is no question that they would bring down his government rather than accede to such a freeze.

Netanyahu's own conceivable flexibility must have been impacted by a poll reported by *Ha'aretz* on February 5. He is reported to be losing popularity precisely because of his compromise — perceived as weakness — on the settlement issue. Thus, he personally has little political space in which to maneuver, even when leaving his coalition aside.

At this point, in my view, the only way things could be moved forward is for the Obama Administration to announce a dramatic new initiative that essentially forces both sides to negotiate, and set enforceable consequences if they do not. It is possible that Obama was contemplating this after a victory on health care. Since that is increasingly unlikely, and his political position is by no means solid, it is dubious that he will be able to launch one. Without an initiative by Obama, the stalemate will continue until it is overtaken by some major development, which will be almost certainly negative.

I should emphasize that success for such an Obama initiative is highly problematic, both in terms of moving the parties forward and in American political terms. However, I really can't see anything else that has an equal, let alone greater, chance of success.

— Interview by Michael Collins Dunn

The Omani *Falaj*: Critical Resource Management, and Community Governance

Water resource management is one of the most pressing issues facing the Middle East. This problem is particularly acute for water deficit countries such as Oman. However, in the Omani Sultanate the greatest tool in water resource management is an ancient irrigation system that is maintained and operated through an egalitarian system of community governance. This system is called the *aflaj* (*falaj* singular) and has existed in Oman for over three millennia. This article will focus on the aspects of community governance, and the broader socioeconomic implications of the *aflaj* system in past, contemporary, and future Omani society.

Currently, there are 3,017 functional *aflaj* in Oman. Their water is used for washing, irrigation, and of course, drinking. There are three main types of *aflaj* in Oman: the Ghayli *falaj* which relies on continual water flow from local wadis, the 'Ayni *falaj*, depending on mountain spring water, and the Dwodi *falaj*, similar to the Persian *qanat*, which draws on deep underground water reserves. Altogether, these *aflaj* are responsible for the allocation of nearly 240 million gallons of water a year. This figure accounts for 70% of the country's usable water and roughly 55% of the water utilized in irrigation. The impact of this ancient marvel has won it accolades from the UNESCO World Heritage Organization not only for its meticulous engineering, but also because, "[The] systems reflect the former total dependence of communities on this irrigation and a time-honored, fair and effective management and sharing of water resources, underpinned by mutual dependence and communal values." One of the most important features of the *aflaj* is its governance.



The al-Khatmin *Falaj* and Birkat al-Mawz. (Photo: Chad Hope)

The word "*aflaj*" stands for more than just a physical system of water channels; it also represents a network of resource management and shareholding. The governance of the *aflaj* is distributed in a hierarchy with several positions: The *Wakil* or agent of the *aflaj*, appointed by the village shaykh, is in charge of renting out the *falaj*, organizing water distribution, and maintaining and selling property adjacent to the *falaj*. The *Qabidh* (treasurer) uses the rent accrued from *aflaj* shareholders to maintain the *falaj* and also organizes water auctions. The *'Arif* (foreman) ensures the physical structure is maintained and repaired, and most importantly he arranges the *dawran* or cycles of water allocation time for shareholders. Finally the *Bidars* (laborers) compose the *falaj* workforce and direct the irrigation of gardens, cleaning the channel; they receive their pay from individual *falaj* landlords. These positions form the nucleus of the community's water management and provide the basis for the further development of village life. However, the significance of this system falls less in the variety of the positions, and more on the systems' greater societal and economic implications.

The economic and social development of Oman's northern interior has been made possible by the *aflaj*. The system of *aflaj* management brought community cohesiveness to nomadic groups, allowed for the further development of structured village life, and brought economic viability to a harsh arid region. Moreover, the *aflaj* allowed for not only the growth of agricultural products such as date palms and other seasonal crops, but also for the construction of craft-based economies, and eventually commercial economies. The development of community infrastructure, education, and civil society also were made possible by the *aflaj* system.

The villages that based their social and economic lives around their *aflaj* are what John Wilkinson, in his book *Water and Tribal Settlement in South-East Arabia*, would call a "*qanat* community." A perfect example of a *qanat* community is Izki, an ancient town in the shadow of Jebal Akdhar in Oman's Dhakiliya region. Home to the *falaj* al-Maliki, the oldest intact *aflaj* in the Sultanate, Izki is a community that has been largely united by its irrigation system. Income generated by renting shares of the *aflaj* was and still is often spent on communal projects such as education and care for the village's indigent; funds also were spent on guests of the village. Izki is just one example of such a *qanat* community. These communities helped to forge the backbone of the Sultanate's interior and allow for the settlement of the land by nomadic peoples. However, the contemporary implications of the *aflaj* system and its relevance to future Omani society are equally as significant as its historical importance.

The nature of the *aflaj* system is self-regulating and communally governed, but the Omani government also has played a role in maintaining the *aflaj*. The Ministry of Agriculture annually renovates portions of 150 *aflaj*, and measures have been taken to limit the proximity of wells used for mechanical pumping to the wells of

intact *aflaj*. This special attention shown towards the *aflaj* signifies its importance not only for interior communities, but also the Sultanate as a whole.

The *aflaj* and its relation to communal values, meticulous management, and shareholding structures continue to play an integral role in the allocation of Oman's most important resource. Moreover, it also has been equally invaluable in the construction and survival of egalitarian communities. This enduring system continues to be the driving force behind the Sultanate's agriculture, usable water, and community life. Its economic and social value ensures that the *aflaj* will continue to have relevance in Omani life.

— Douglas Isaac Badrigian



Swimmers in an Omani *Falaj*. (Photo: Cory Rutz)

The Middle East Journal

The Spring issue of *The Middle East Journal* offers a number of articles dealing with Islamic movements and other issues of current interest:

- Toby Matthiesen, "Hizbullah al-Hijaz: A History of the Most Radical Saudi Shi'a Opposition Group." A detailed study of this Saudi Shi'ite group.
- Stacey Philbrick Yadav, "Understanding 'What Islamists Want:' Public Debate and Contestation in Lebanon and Yemen." A study and comparison of the experience in these two critical countries.
- Ilan Peleg and Paul Scham: "Historical Breakthroughs in Arab-Israeli Negotiations: Lessons for the Future." A look at current options based on the lessons of earlier breakthroughs in Israeli-Palestinian peace.
- Nimah Mazaheri, "Iraq and the Domestic Political Effect of Sanctions, 1990-2003." A study of the impact of international sanctions on Iraq, with relevance to other cases today.
- Yesim Arat, "The Civil Code Amendment in Turkey, and What it Tells Us about Islam in Turkish Politics." A look at a key women's rights issue in Turkey and how it relates to secular/religious debates in Turkish society.
- The book review article will deal with several works on Post-Zionism in Israeli culture, as reviewed by Professor Uri Ram of Ben-Gurion University.

Also, follow the MEI Editor's Blog at <http://mideasti.blogspot.com> for ongoing commentary on events in the Middle East.

— Michael Collins Dunn

Beyond the Beltway

The beginning of 2010 saw President Barack Obama's first State of the Union address and put the Middle East back in the headlines. In the new year, MEI scholars spoke at more than 45 venues across the country, reaching thousands of people. Among many topics, our scholars focused a great deal on Iran and its ruling regime, the politics of oil in the Middle East, and President Obama's political goals for the region as outlined in his address.

MEI in the News

Iran and its volatile protests, the fear of nuclear proliferation, and the battle on Capitol Hill over the Stop Terrorist Entry Program (STEP) Act, have generated a great deal of interest in our scholars' expertise.

Trita Parsi was interviewed by *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, and the Rachel Maddow Show on possible power shifts within the Iranian government and the prospect of Iranian nuclear weapons development. Parsi also published an op-ed in *Foreign Policy* addressing the need for a pro-democracy movement in Iran.

Mehrzad Boroujerdi and **Alex Vatanka** commented on Iranian issues in several news media outlets, including *The New York Times*, *Washington Times*, Voice of America, and *The Eagle*. They argued that the unstable political structure within Iran cannot possibly take on the financial, political, and social responsibilities of nuclear weapons. **Thomas Lippman** was interviewed by the BBC World Service on the subject of nuclear weapons development in Iran.

President Obama's State of the Union address led to a great deal of speculation, evaluation, and criticism from a wide range of experts. **Abdallah Schleifer**, **David Mack**, and **Richard Murphy** commented on NPR and in *The National* on an apparent lack of focus on the Middle East in the State of the Union address. **Marvin Weinbaum** commented on President Obama's Afghanistan/Pakistan strategies in the *Huffington Post* and *Politico*.

Wendy Chamberlin published an op-ed in the *McClatchy Tribune* that was republished in *USA Today*, the *Sacramento Bee*, and by Search for Common Ground. In the article, she suggested key structural changes to the Kerry-Lugar Bill, and also explained the "trust deficit" between the United States and Pakistan.

In January, Yemen attracted a great deal of attention. **David Newton** and **Wayne White** discussed the situation with Al Jazeera and *The Christian Science Monitor*, respectively. In February, the naming of Robert Ford as the new US Ambassador to Syria garnered media attention and was discussed by Richard Murphy and **Murhaf Joujati** in the *New York Post* and several international publications. **Mishkat Al Moumin** also was cited prominently in February regarding the interests of international oil companies in Iraq. Her insights were rerun in many investor publications and mainstream media outlets, including *The Guardian*.



Ambassador David Newton speaks on Al Jazeera about the situation in Yemen.

Around Town

Our scholars also have been active this quarter in Washington, speaking at the American Muslim Alliance, the World Affairs Council, the Brookings Institution, and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, among other venues.



Ambassador Wendy Chamberlin and former Senator Chuck Hagel on stage discussing US global leadership.

Wendy Chamberlin spoke around town on topics such as US assistance to Pakistan, political development in Afghanistan, and US-Middle Eastern policy in general. She lectured at the Foreign Service Institute, the Aspen Institute, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), and the Brookings Institution. She also participated in a panel discussion co-hosted by Meridian International and Gallup about the American role in global leadership with former United States Senator Chuck Hagel and Clive Crook, a senior editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*.

At the beginning of the quarter, Trita Parsi testified before the House Committee of Oversight and Government Reform, Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs about the STEP Act. On January 26,

Wendy Chamberlin, **Gonol Tol**, and David Mack spoke to a Turkish class from Bahcesehir University about US-Turkey relations as well as Middle East politics in general.

Beyond the Beltway

Many of our scholars recently have spoken at universities and colleges across the country. Marvin Weinbaum spoke to students at Columbia University and the Knight Center for Specialized Journalism at the University of Maryland, where he lectured on US policy in Afghanistan. He was also a guest at a reception introducing the new issue of Columbia University's *Journal of International Affairs*, where he spoke on President Obama's "Af-Pak" policy. Wayne White joined a panel of international experts on Iran and the Middle East at Columbia University, discussing the Iranian elections and their potential effects on the country's future political structure.

Wendy Chamberlin spoke to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs about the lack of understanding between the American Foreign Service and Pakistan. She later was a keynote speaker at Iowa State University's "World Affairs Series." Ambassador **Phil Wilcox** traveled to Los Angeles to speak to Meretz USA, an Israeli peace foundation, and to University Synagogue in Irvine, California, where he addressed Israeli-Palestinian issues as well as how to promote peace between the two groups.

Los Angeles also welcomed Mehrzad Boroujerdi at the University of California, Los Angeles where he was a featured speaker in the Persian Lecture Series. He spoke to students in Persian about current issues in Iran and attempts at political development. He also spoke to students studying international relations at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, where he focused on the political environment in Iran, and how Iran can make political progress in the current global climate.

Internationally, MEI scholars traveled abroad to Muscat, Cairo, Barcelona, and London. **Andrea Rugh** traveled to Muscat and Cairo, where she presented on the topic of culture in writings about the Middle East. She then accompanied a group of students in February to Oman as their specialist on Omani history, culture, and society. **Ilan Peleg** taught a full course for graduate students at the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona about the importance of majority-minority relations in the contemporary world. **Herman Franssen** traveled to conferences in Oman and London to address the global petroleum industry and its impact on the international economy. He also speculated on the future of the oil industry and international economic stability.



Allen Keiswetter, Wendy Chamberlin, and Richard Murphy at the Seventh Global Strategy Group Middle East Conference in Kuwait.



Marvin Weinbaum speaks at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Finally, Wendy Chamberlin, **Allen Keiswetter**, **Aamir Rehman**, and Richard Murphy traveled to Kuwait for the Seventh Global Strategy Group Middle East on February 17 and 18. Allen Keiswetter also participated in the Seventh Annual US-Islamic World Forum in Doha from February 13 to 15. He took part in a working group on religion and diplomacy.

— Nancy Coblenz

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