

Letter from Amman: Two cats and a monkey

By Emily Lodge

There's an Arab fable about two cats fighting over a piece of cheese who ask a monkey to make sure each gets a fair slice; in the end, the monkey eats all the cheese. Since the Oslo accords in '95, the monkey, Israel, has been eating the cheese pizza pie of the West Bank, little by little, all the while they have been negotiating over that same pie with one cat, Fatah, and simultaneously fighting over it with the other, Hamas, thus dividing and neutralizing both parties.

From this side of the Jordan, sources affirm that the recent UN Palestinian statehood bid is no substitute for negotiation; though a positive first step, it is a relatively empty one, a "paper issue," and that a real state addressing the final status issues must come through negotiations with Israel. The problem is that Israel has been gobbling up the pie that they are supposed to be negotiating over. It serves Israel's interest to keep Gaza impoverished and Hamas in place as the "paper tiger"—their casualties in the last war vastly outnumbering the Israelis—because it makes Fatah look weak; negotiating the recent peace through their Egyptian ally compounds Fatah's image as unrepresentative of the Palestinian people.

From resolution 242 to Camp David in 2000, the international consensus has been that Israel would withdraw from the West Bank. The Quartet--US, EU, Russia, and UN—has set out a roadmap calling for a return to the '67 borders except for the four main settlement blocks at the border, only 5% of the West Bank, or 170,000 of the 250,000 settlers. Palestine would receive land swaps from less populous Israeli land. Today, with whole neighborhoods being destroyed in East Jerusalem, and construction on-going in Hebron and the Jordan Valley, the future bread basket and heart of the Palestinian state, it is hard to imagine that Prime Minister Netanyahu would be keen to uproot the remaining 80,000 settlers, particularly with every candidate campaigning on annexing the West Bank winning election.

Hamas wants a Palestinian state from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan Valley. They are willing to have a truce with Israel and have turned a blind eye to the settlements issue until the balance of power changes; they use the Crusaders as their example. They do not object to Jews remaining in Palestine, only to a Jewish national state. Iran, meanwhile, uses the Palestinian issue as wind in their sail to further their brand of extremism, but she has bigger fish to fry—the control of the free flow of oil through the straits of Hormuz. Similarly Hezbollah's only concern for the Palestinians is as the vise that serves to tighten their grip on Lebanon. Israel couldn't devise a more palatable situation for keeping the status quo while gulping down the pizza pie.

In the next few weeks, the Gaza cease-fire agreement that calls for a discussion of the loosening of the blockade will be hammered out. It calls for a loosening of the free movement of trade and people but it doesn't guarantee it. Since the blockade is obviously not preventing weapons from getting through tunnels from Egypt (even though President Morsi has worked harder on this than Mubarak did), Israel might just as well try a show of goodwill to ease the blockade--allowing Gaza tulips to reach markets in the West Bank and Europe. Patrolling the tunnels more effectively combined with strict adherence to an economic program is the yellow brick road for Egypt to IMF loans.

The interesting player in this vicious circle is Jordan whom Israel would like to manage the transition to Palestinian rule. The problem is that Israel is only offering 42% of the original '67 lands which, of course, Jordan controlled in the '48-'67 period. Senior sources here point out the significance of Mahmoud Abbas' recent concession on the right of return when he said he no longer had an automatic right to return and live in Safed in northern Galilee where he was born in 1935. ("It's my right to see it but not to live there.") This attempt to engender trust between the Palestinian and Israeli peoples was largely ignored by a slew of right-wing Likuders who have recently come to power. Netanyahu is definitely not alone in his quest to acquire all of ancient Samaria and Judea.

This "my way or the highway" attitude from either the Likud or Hamas can only lead to folly. It is astonishing under the circumstances that only one in five Palestinians in the West Bank does not support a two state solution. The majority recognizes Israel's right to exist in spite of the failure of successive US presidents to stick to their commitments to the Palestinians on the settlements issue. At the beginning of his first term, President Obama, to his credit, called them "illegal and illegitimate" but after a brief freeze on construction, Netanyahu went on a building rampage.

Since the demographics favor the Palestinians many analysts say a two state solution would allow Israel to keep its Jewish majority. If Israel annexes the West Bank, Palestinians would comprise 50% of the population as opposed to 20%. A two state solution would also prevent Israel from becoming a totally apartheid state. At present the Palestinians have no rights and are ghettoized between settlements. Not only would Israel lose their Jewish majority, they would become another South Africa. A happier alternative and one suggested by a senior member of the royal family is that Israel would become one of a tripartite confederation on the Benelux model with Jordan and the West Bank. This would not only allow the free movement of trade and people, promote economic growth and prosperity but would fulfill the cherished vision of peace of over 100 years. It is in fact the only sane alternative and an inevitable one; the only question is how long it will take for both parties to realize it.

Word Count: 1000

Emily Lodge, a free-lance journalist, compiled this article from a series of interviews with high-level officials.