

Five Basic Talking Points on Israel
by **David A. Harris, Executive Director**
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In discussing or debating Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it may be helpful to emphasize the following points:

Peace

No nation on earth yearns for peace more than Israel. Since its founding 54 years ago, Israel has not known a single day of peace because it has not been fully accepted by all its neighbors, some of whom still openly call for its annihilation.

It has carried an unimaginable defense burden, buried too many of its sons and daughters, and coped with the realization that its margin of error is almost nil, given the country's tiny size (until the Six-Day War it was no wider than nine miles at its narrowest point).

The notion of peace has always been central to Judaism and the Jewish ethical tradition. It remains so today.

Whenever a credible peace partner emerged, Israel immediately responded. Treaties with Egypt and Jordan, based on territorial compromise, are the proof.

Tragically, no credible Palestinian peace partner has yet emerged. President Bush said so in his landmark speech of June 24, 2002, when he spoke of the endemic terrorism, violence, corruption, and lack of democracy in the current Palestinian leadership.

As far back as 1947 (the UN Partition Plan) and as recently as 2001 (the Clinton-Barak Plan), the Palestinians could have had their own state living side by side with Israel. They refused in both instances. They wanted something altogether different—Israel's disappearance as a Jewish state.

When a credible Palestinian partner does emerge, no doubt Israel will engage it seriously and in a spirit of compromise that seeks to balance Israel's need for security and recognized borders with the Palestinian quest for self-determination and dignity.

Democracy

Israel is a liberal democracy, the only one in the Middle East.

It shares common values with the United States, including free and fair elections with multiple parties, smooth transfers of power from one leader to another, an independent judiciary, a free press, emancipation of women, and respect for the Christian and Muslim communities in the country.

Is Israel a perfect democracy? No more than any democracy is. But its society and value system reflect a fundamental respect for human dignity and freedom that distinguishes it from the autocratic and totalitarian states that surround it.

Examine the record of any of Israel's neighbors, where leaders stay in power until they die or are ousted in a coup d'etat, and where respect for basic rights is spotty at best, non-existent at worst.

Government

The current Israeli government is a national unity government. This point is often lost in the constant references to the "Sharon" government, as if the prime minister were acting alone.

Both the defense and foreign ministers are members of the left-of-center Labor Party, while the prime minister is a member of the right-of-center Likud Party.

This government continues to enjoy remarkably widespread support in the country and today reflects the center of the Israeli political spectrum.

As a democracy, elections are regularly scheduled—the next one is slated for the fall of 2003—and governments in Israel rise and fall based on the *will of the people*.

Self-defense

Israel did *not* initiate the current round of violence that began in September 2000. Indeed, the violence started precisely when Israel, with active American support, was offering the Palestinians the chance for their *first state ever*, on 96 percent of the West Bank and Gaza, with the bulk of Israeli settlements to be removed, and Jerusalem to be shared.

Israel, like any other nation, has the right and obligation to defend itself against terrorists and suicide bombers. The U.S. acted no differently after September 11. No one would have suggested that Washington sit down and negotiate with Al Qaeda or the Taliban after 9/11.

In any military action, there is unavoidable damage and there are unintended casualties, but this should never blur fundamental distinctions between the two sides.

In Afghanistan, U.S. forces have inadvertently killed innocent civilians and hit Red Cross facilities, and NATO forces fighting strictly from the air in Serbia—so as to avoid NATO casualties—had similar experiences, including the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade.

Unfortunate as such accidents are, they do not call into question the overriding need for military action in both cases.

So, too, in the case of Israel. The best strategy for fighting terrorism is preemptive, seeking to prevent the terrorists from striking, going after the infrastructure that supports terrorism, and making clear that the nation will not be cowed by the terrorists.

At the same time, the Israeli military abides by a strict code of conduct that is among the most stringent in the world. In Jenin, for example, which has been a center of Palestinian terrorism, rather than bomb from the air, Israeli troops went house to house to minimize *Palestinian* civilian casualties. As a result, 23 Israeli soldiers lost their lives in the fierce fighting with well-armed Palestinians.

When lapses occur—and they do in the Israeli military, as in the armies of all other democratic countries—they are investigated and, when appropriate, those guilty are punished.

Israeli military actions are complicated by the fact that Palestinian gunmen have absolutely no hesitation operating from civilian zones, utilizing hospitals, ambulances, apartment buildings, churches, and even schools, in order to draw Israeli fire and then portray the Israeli army as inflicting damage on innocent Palestinians and their institutions.

Occupation

Israel never sought occupation. Indeed, in Jewish history the Jewish people never attempted to dominate or subjugate another people.

The occupation came about because, in 1967, Egypt and Syria repeatedly called for Israel's annihilation, mobilized their armies, and took other steps that were clearly intended to wipe Israel off the map. This history is documented.

These days some people are bored by history, but it is vital to understand how we got to this point.

After 1967, even in the absence of successful peace talks with the Palestinians, there was a notable Israeli effort to improve living conditions for the local population, although in recent years, as a result of the 1993 Oslo Accords, the vast majority of Palestinians have come under the daily rule of the Palestinian Authority.

Since 1967, there has been substantial growth in Palestinian per capita income, life expectancy, education, and other socio-economic indices, while infant mortality and illiteracy have fallen dramatically. To cite only one example: Before 1967, there was no Palestinian university; by 1993, there were seven.

This is not to suggest that the Palestinian situation was ideal; it was not. But Israel made good-faith efforts to improve life on the ground, while facing an ongoing challenge of terrorism and violence from these very same areas.

At the end of the day, the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be political. Israel, time and again, has shown its willingness to sit down and resolve the difficult issues of borders, security arrangements, settlements, refugees, water, etc.

It is time for the Palestinians to take responsibility for their own destiny, stop blaming others for their current situation, abandon terrorism, and insist on a leadership committed to peace. They will find a willing partner in Israel.