

**GUEST COLUMN:** Gilead Sher

# Bottom-up Push for a Solution

ISRAEL WAS WRONG TO PUBLICLY AND DIPLOMATICally blame former Palestinian Authority (PA) president Yasser Arafat for the failure of the Camp David summit back in July 2000. And today, it is just as stupid for both sides to claim victory in the UN arena. So now, as the diplomatic fog around the September events at the UN clears, it's a good idea for all concerned to take a calmer, more thoughtful look at their own vital interests.

From an Israeli perspective, time is running out for those who want to ensure the continued existence of a Jewish and democratic state within recognized boundaries alongside a demilitarized Palestinian state. For Israel, it is therefore more critical than ever to bring an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to carve out the reality of two states for two peoples. In the absence of a resolution to the conflict, Israel faces growing international isolation that will intolerably affect its economy and security.

A closer look at the essential national objectives of the Palestinians reveals little value to their decision to accrue one more international resolution on their behalf. As US President Barack Obama has declared repeatedly, "No vote at the United Nations will ever create an independent Palestinian state" and "the United States will stand up against efforts to single Israel out at the UN or in any international forum."

Yet the current Palestinian leadership is as good as it gets: Palestinian leaders recognize the State of Israel, support a two-state solution, coordinate with Israel on security matters, promote business and trade, and officially oppose violence. If they continue to lose legitimacy among their people, as they have over the past several years, the self-fulfilling prophecy of "no partner" may come to be.

Previous negotiators, including myself, spent years intensively negotiating the intertwined core issues of Jerusalem, the holy sites, the refugees, territory, borders and settlements, and security. We know what a final agreement will look like; its contours are clear. Ever since former US president Bill Clinton's parameters were laid down in late December 2000, every political initiative has lead to very similar fundamental solutions.

I have no doubt that only an end to the occupation will secure the basic values of this country, through the delineation of borders around a democratic state, with universal values of liberalism, pluralism and human rights and a Jewish majority. For us, the silent majority of Israelis, this is the essence of the quest for the end of conflict and the ensuing finality of claims.

But for that to happen, the silent majority in Israel must raise its political voice, just as the voice of the vast majority of Palestinians who seek peaceful co-existence with Israel must be heard once and for all. We must win over the individual and collective hearts and minds of the peoples in our region. We need a grass-roots level paradigm change in order to prepare for reconciliation. Tangible traction on the ground must be simultaneously promoted so that this bottom-up progress will be able to sustain a political dialogue.

In Israel, a few groups are getting their act together to say: We are proud to be Israeli, Jewish and Zionist, and refuse to apologize for it. And we respect the Arab minority living among us as entirely equal citizens.

Blue White Future is one of these political, non-partisan movements, focusing on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the basis of a "two states for two peoples" solution within defensible



AVI KATZ

borders by facilitating the relocation and absorption of settlers. The settlers who will be relocated from their homes in anticipation of a permanent agreement with the Palestinians must be absorbed within Israel in a manner that demonstrates compassion, respect and recognition of the sacrifices they have made.

Despite the obvious domestic and external obstacles, we must move forward. And we need the American administration to proactively stand by us, Israelis and Palestinians alike. Now is the time for Obama to bring all parties concerned into binding, continuous, hands-on negotiations that lead to a two-state solution.

Process-wise, we must change the "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed" paradigm, which was paramount at Camp David, Taba, and Annapolis, into "what has been agreed should be implemented." This approach will provide the groundwork for a reasonable agreement on boundaries, settlements, security, statehood and the economy. Subsequently, the negotiations over Jerusalem and the refugees will continue in a state-to-state fashion.

I am confident that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will eventually come to an end. My best judgment is that an agreement, even if partial or gradual, is attainable and peace is possible. As former US envoy to the Mideast Senator George Mitchell said, all conflicts are created by human beings and should be resolved by human beings.

We are no different.

On the day of the establishment of the State of Israel, over 63 years ago, founding father David Ben-Gurion read the Declaration of Independence, which includes the following paragraph:

*...We extend our hand to all neighboring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighborliness, and appeal to them to establish bonds of cooperation and mutual help with the sovereign Jewish people settled in its own land.*

The September events at the UN didn't change the truth and validity of these words.

**Attorney Gilead Sher (colonel, res.) is co-chairman of Blue White Future. He was chief of staff to former prime minister Ehud Barak and a chief negotiator at the Camp David summit and the ensuing Taba talks. He is the author of 'The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Negotiations, 1999-2001: Within Reach.'**