

Crisis Spurs Migration to Israel

By Sara Toth Stub The Wall Street Journal December 3, 2009

Immigration into Israel and the Palestinian West Bank is surging after the financial crisis and economic downturn evaporated jobs elsewhere.

After years of a brain drain from the region, and despite the lack of a peace settlement, by the end of this month about 4,000 North American Jews will have immigrated to Israel this year, an increase of 33% over 2008 and the most in one year since 1973, according to Nefesh B'Nefesh, an organization that oversees and assists with immigration to Israel from North America.

Immigrants to Israel often have a longstanding desire to move, but the economic crisis has pushed them to make the jump this year, said Danny Oberman, executive vice president of Israel operations for Nefesh B'Nefesh. "The economy has a lot to do with it," Mr. Oberman said.

The crisis is also having an impact on the West Bank, which is seeing the return of hundreds of Palestinians, mostly from the Persian Gulf, looking for work as the economy there sours. The West Bank economy -- separate from Israel's -- is expected to grow 5% in 2009.

No official figures are available yet for how many Palestinians have made the move, but the International Monetary Fund is planning to study the issue over the next month.

"The economic crisis worked to our advantage," said Bashar al-Masry, a Palestinian real-estate developer overseeing an \$800 million project to build a new Palestinian city north of Ramallah. "We're seeing more and more people willing to come back."

Amjad Sandoka, 36 years old, a civil engineer from Jerusalem, said he went to work in Dubai seven years ago, but came back in October and found a job in Ramallah. He took a job in the West Bank because he figured he would likely lose his Dubai post, after watching hundreds of people around him being let go.

"I started to feel the crisis there; on the other hand, I heard there was lots of work in the West Bank," Mr. Sandoka said.

Israel's economy, fueled mainly by the software, biomedical, weapons-manufacturing and diamond sectors, has grown at least 4% a year from 2004 to 2008. And Israel has a lower unemployment rate than the U.S., at 7.8%, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics, next to 10.2% in October in the U.S. The Bank of Israel has raised interest rates twice since August, to its current level of 1%, at a time

when banks around the world are cutting rates or leaving them low.

Israel also has almost no exposure to Dubai debt because the Arab League boycott prevents Israelis from investing there. That boycott also lessens the impact the Dubai crisis might normally have had on Israeli exports.

Palestinian Minister of National Economy Hassan Abu-Libdeh cautions that the Palestinian economy might ultimately suffer from the downturn in Dubai, because many Palestinian families rely on remittances sent from relatives working there. Oussama Kanaan, IMF representative in the West Bank and Gaza, said Palestinian remittances made up 10% of Palestinian gross domestic product in 2008. Income from Palestinians working in Israel makes up an additional 12% of Palestinian GDP.

Any impact of lower remittances would most likely be softened if those workers find work in the West Bank. With a building boom under way in Ramallah and other Palestinian cities, fueled partly by international aid money totaling \$1.7 billion in 2008, many returning from Dubai are finding jobs.

In Israel, North American immigrants are making significant contributions to the economy, according to a recent study by consulting firm Deloitte Information Technologies Israel Ltd. U.S. immigrants who came between 2002 and 2008 have contributed directly 989 million shekels (\$262 million) to the Israeli economy, the study said.

Zumi Brody immigrated to Israel with his wife and four young children in August. Mr. Brody, a vice president of a bank, said he had to sell his home in St. Louis for less than what he paid for it to make the move, but paying at least \$10,000 per child to attend Jewish day school would have been burdensome. In Israel, his children can attend a state-funded school and still learn Hebrew and Jewish studies.

The increase in immigration from America also shows a change in the image and economy of Israel. The country is in the process of entering the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and has been upgraded from a developing to a developed economy, said Glenn Yago, an economist at the Milken Institute in Jerusalem.

This wave of American immigration suggests that Israel is shifting "from its primary, historical role as a refuge of last resort to a human- and financial-capital destination of first resort," Mr. Yago said.

Separately, on Wednesday, Israeli police arrested the mayor of a West Bank Jewish settlement after protesters blocked security forces from entering the community to enforce a construction freeze, the Associated Press reported. The showdown was the

most serious incident of settler unrest since Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu last week announced the 10-month building freeze, which bars the construction of new homes in West Bank settlements.

Wanted: Palestinian “Peace Now” Movement

By Khaled Abu Toameh The Hudson Institute (New York) December 8, 2009

Many Palestinians who work with international or Israeli organizations whose job is to promote peace and coexistence in the Middle East are often afraid or reluctant to discuss the nature of their work, even though it is much more important to teach Palestinian children about coexistence, peace and normalization with Israel than to pressure Mahmoud Abbas to return to the negotiating table.

In the West Bank and Gaza Strip, any talk about these is still associated with treason and defeatism. The Palestinian leadership’s actions and words have sent the following message to its constituents: Any person who thinks about normalization or coexistence with the Jewish state will be severely punished.

By cracking down on the Palestinians who are working for normalization and coexistence with Israel, both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas have prevented the emergence of a real peace camp among Palestinians. Has anyone ever heard of an authentic and serious “Palestinian Peace Now” movement in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip?

Where are all the American, European and local non-governmental organizations that are supposed to use US and EU taxpayers’ money to promote peace, moderation and coexistence?

When the Strings of Freedom Orchestra returned home to the refugee camp of Jenin in the northern West Bank, the musical director, Wafa Yunis, was fired and her studio apartment in the camp was sealed. The Palestinian Authority, whose leaders have been talking to Israel for more than fifteen years, accused Yunis of “exploiting the children for the purpose of normalizing ties with Israel.”

While Israel has seen the creation of scores of organizations that work toward achieving peace with the country’s Arab neighbors over the past thirty years, it is still taboo in the Palestinian Authority-controlled territories to talk about normalization and coexistence between Palestinians and Jews.

A Palestinian woman from Ramallah who works for an EU-funded group that tries to promote peaceful coexistence between the two communities says she has received many warnings from Palestinians that she must quit or face retaliation.

Her crime, she has been told, is that she and her group are seeking normalization with Israel.

This woman is not alone. A Palestinian man from Jerusalem who was hired by another group to recruit Palestinian children for a joint Arab-Israeli trip to the US says he has received death threats from Palestinian Authority officials. In the end, he says, he was forced to give up the task out of fear for his life.

Such threats by the Palestinian Authority should not come as a surprise given its leaders’ record in this regard. Earlier this year, Palestinian officials disbanded a Palestinian children’s orchestra for performing at the Holocaust Survivors Center near Tel Aviv. And there is another message, one related to the Holocaust: By punishing the children and their musical director for performing in front of Holocaust survivors, the Palestinian Authority is denying Palestinians any opportunity to learn about that issue.

In this regard, the Palestinian leadership in the West Bank is not much different than the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip, which has announced fierce opposition to including the Holocaust in the local school curriculum.

Over the past two decades, the Palestinian Authority and Hamas have radicalized Palestinians to a point where it has even become to risky to send children to perform at the Holocaust Survivors Center or to bring Palestinian and Israeli women to joint conferences in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Such joint conferences and seminars sometimes do take place, but only in European capitals and resorts or in North America.

Although nearly two decades have passed since the signing of the Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO, there is almost no mention of a real grassroots peace camp in Ramallah or Gaza City.

Those who are passionate about the Israeli-Arab conflict and would like to see an end to the violence and hatred should start searching for ways to encourage the emergence of a serious peace camp in the West Bank and Gaza Strip – one whose leaders and members would be able to stand up to both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas.

The newsletter wants to wish all of our loyal readers a happy holiday season, Chanukkah starts on December 11 through December 19.

Europe Seeks to Divide Jerusalem

By Dore Gold Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs December 10, 2009

According to the 1993 Oslo Agreements, Jerusalem is one of the issues to be discussed in future permanent status negotiations. The Swedish move to have the European foreign ministers back a declaration recognizing eastern Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state clearly pre-judges the outcome of those talks.

When the EU foreign ministers met on December 8, they issued a statement that only partly softened the Swedish draft. It dropped the reference to the Palestinian state being comprised of "the West Bank and Gaza with East Jerusalem as its capital," but still retained a proposal that envisions "Jerusalem as the future capital of two states."

The EU statement insisted that the EU "will not recognize any changes in the pre-1967 borders" without the agreement of the parties. Yet by enshrining the 1967 lines as a previous political border, the EU was ignoring that these were only armistice lines and not a recognized international boundary. In fact, it was UN Security Council Resolution 242 which acknowledged that the pre-1967 lines might change.

By waving the carrot of a statement of support for eastern Jerusalem to be part of a Palestinian state, the Swedes are causing Mahmoud Abbas' advisors to believe that if they avoid bilateral negotiations with Israel, they can create the political environment for third party intervention to their advantage.

What is needed is an ongoing Israeli diplomatic effort for Jerusalem, underlining Israel's legal rights and its role as the protector of the holy sites. Unfortunately, European states, which once sought to protect the holy sites of Christianity in Jerusalem, today appear to be oblivious to what would happen to their churches were the Old City of Jerusalem to be given to a Palestinian regime under the influence of Hamas.

In December 2009, the last month that Sweden held the rotating presidency of the 27-nation European Union, Stockholm undertook an initiative to have the European foreign ministers back a declaration recognizing eastern Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state. According to the 1993 Oslo Agreements, Jerusalem is one of the issues to be discussed in future permanent status negotiations; the Swedish move clearly pre-judges the outcome of those talks.

There were two extremely problematic clauses in the Swedish draft: "The European Union calls for the urgent resumption of negotiations that will lead, within an agreed time-frame, to a two-state solution with an independent, democratic, contiguous and viable state of Palestine, comprising the West Bank and Gaza **and with East Jerusalem as its capital** [emphasis added]" (Paragraph 1).

"The Council recalls that it has never recognized the annexation of East Jerusalem. If there is to be genuine peace, a way must be found to resolve the status of Jerusalem as the capital of two states" (Paragraph 7).¹

To make matters worse, the draft document added a European "commitment to support further efforts and steps towards Palestinian statehood and to be able, at the appropriate time, to recognize a Palestinian state." By not making the European offer of recognition contingent upon a negotiated outcome, this phraseology will only encourage the Palestinian leadership to unilaterally declare a Palestinian state.

The Swedish proposal was initially backed by Great Britain, Belgium, Ireland, Luxembourg, and Malta.

When the EU foreign ministers met on December 8, they issued a statement that only partly softened the Swedish draft by modifying the first of the two problematic clauses but leaving the second clause intact. In Paragraph 1 they dropped the reference to the Palestinian state being comprised of "the West Bank and Gaza with East Jerusalem as its capital." But the EU statement still retained the proposal that envisioned "Jerusalem as the future capital of two states."² It also insisted that the EU "will not recognize any changes in the pre-1967 borders, including with regard to Jerusalem," without the agreement of the parties. By enshrining the 1967 lines as a previous political border, the EU was ignoring that these were only armistice lines and not a recognized international boundary. In fact, it was UN Security Council Resolution 242 which acknowledged that the pre-1967 lines might change; not surprisingly, the EU made no explicit reference to that resolution. From the Israeli perspective, while the EU statement still fundamentally contradicted Israeli policy on Jerusalem, which called for keeping the city united, at least the EU statement was consistent with past EU policy declarations on Jerusalem and did not contain language that went further, as did the Swedish draft.

In both the Swedish draft and the final EU statement, agreement over the future of Jerusalem is to be reached through negotiations, though this point is somewhat strengthened in the final EU version. Apparently, the U.S. government was particularly concerned with this very point. On December 8, 2009, U.S. State Department Spokesman Phillip Crowley stressed: "We are aware of the EU statement, but our position on Jerusalem is clear. And we believe that as a final status issue, this is best addressed inside a formal negotiation among the parties directly." Clearly, Washington took issue with the remaining ambiguities contained

in the EU statement and how the Palestinians might interpret them to support an option of unilaterally declaring a Palestinian state with eastern Jerusalem as its capital.

The Record of Recent European Intervention on the Issue of Jerusalem The Swedish initiative is not the first time Israel has heard Europe publically doubting its standing in its capital. Ten years ago, on May 4, 1999, the five-year Oslo Interim Agreement was about to come to an end and the Palestinian Authority, led by Yasser Arafat, was considering a unilateral declaration of Palestinian statehood. As the date drew near, Palestinian leaders debated whether they should unilaterally declare a Palestinian state and what should be its borders. Abu Ala, one of the Palestinian architects of the Oslo Agreements, wrote in the Palestinian daily *al-Hayat al-Jadida* on December 21, 1998, that the basis of a Palestinian state had already been established, namely, the borders set in the 1947 Partition Plan - UN General Assembly Resolution 181.

According to Resolution 181, all of Jerusalem was supposed to be an international entity for ten years under UN administration, at which time its residents could vote on whether to be incorporated into the Jewish state or the Arab state that the resolution proposed. The international entity was called in Latin a "*corpus separatum*" - or separate entity. On March 1, 1999, Germany held the rotating presidency of the European Union and its ambassador in Israel sent what is called a *note verbale* to the Israeli Foreign Ministry which stated that the EU "reaffirms its known position concerning the specific status of Jerusalem as a *corpus separatum*." Abu Ala celebrated the EU paper, declaring that according to the EU, both western and eastern Jerusalem were "under occupation."

Historically, Resolution 181 had been overtaken by events. Subsequent UN resolutions increasingly made reference to the 1949 Armistice Agreements. Moreover, during the 1948 War, Jerusalem came under attack by at least three Arab armies. It was evident that the UN had failed to implement its own resolution and the internationalized *corpus separatum* it proposed. Jerusalem was defended by the nascent Israel Defense Forces - not by the UN. As a result, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion declared that Israel regarded Resolution 181's references to Jerusalem to be "null and void," and that remained the position of subsequent Israeli governments.

Irresponsible European diplomacy only radicalized the Palestinian position back in 1999. Arafat started a campaign to obtain international recognition of Resolution 181 as the basis for Palestinian statehood, replacing any reference to Resolution 242. Arafat visited the UN in March 1999 to advance this idea. While he was still in New York,

the PLO observer at the UN, Nasser al-Kidwa, sent a letter to Secretary General Kofi Annan and all UN members which stated: "Israel must still explain to the international community the measures it took illegally to extend its laws and regulations to the territory it occupied in the war of 1948, beyond the territory allocated to the Jewish state in Resolution 181."³ Effective Israeli diplomacy in 1999 caused the PLO to retreat from its Resolution 181 campaign and its plan to unilaterally declare a state at that time. But what was demonstrated was that rather than narrowing the gaps between Israel and the Palestinians, the Europeans succeeded only in widening them.

Implications for Future Peace Negotiations

The Europeans have been making troubling statements on Jerusalem since the 1980 Venice Declaration, which rejected unilateral Israeli steps to reunify the city after 1967. But since 2002, they have had a new responsibility as members of the Quartet - along with the U.S., Russia, and the UN Secretariat - to help assist the parties in reaching a negotiated solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt knows that in the November 9, 2008, Quartet statement, the Quartet members agreed to the principle that "third parties should not intervene in bilateral negotiations."

By waving the carrot of a statement of support for eastern Jerusalem to be part of a Palestinian state, the Swedes are causing Mahmoud Abbas' advisors to believe that if they avoid bilateral negotiations with Israel, they can create the political environment for third party intervention to their advantage. The Swedes have reduced the incentive for Abbas to return to any negotiations with Israel. Moreover, by violating a Quartet principle, the Swedes undermine European credibility with Israel: Who needs the Quartet if its members do not live up to their obligations?

The impact of the Swedish initiative on future Israeli-Palestinian negotiations has some similarity to what happened with the EU in 1999: rather than make negotiations easier, here a European initiative only makes them harder and encourages Palestinian unilateralism. Presently, it is well known that the Obama administration's insistence on a settlement freeze has caused Abbas to make a settlement freeze a precondition to the renewal of negotiations, one that never existed previously. Israel rightfully rejects the idea that its ten-month settlement freeze apply to eastern Jerusalem. Unfortunately, the Swedish initiative will only reinforce Abbas' demand that any settlement freeze also apply to eastern Jerusalem, thereby reducing the chances that negotiations will be restarted.

The Problem with Sweden Sweden has become a particularly troubling country for Israel in Europe. On August 17, 2009, the Swedish daily

Aftonbladet published an article by freelance writer Donald Bostrom, who argued that the IDF had harvested the organs of Palestinians and was sending them abroad. While many in the Swedish media condemned the newspaper story, the Swedish government refused to take a position. When the Swedish ambassador in Tel Aviv, Elisabet Borsini Bonnier, expressed her disgust with the article, the Swedish government decided to distance itself from its own ambassador's statement. Since that event, Swedish-Israeli relations have been tense. The problem is that for the second half of 2009, Sweden has held the rotating presidency of the European Union and therefore can propose new European policies that conflict with Israel's most fundamental interests. In the meantime, Sweden has totally changed its official approach to Israel: from being one of the friendliest countries to the Jewish state, its government is now exhibiting increasing signs of hostility to Israel's positions.⁴

Lessons for Israel There is an important lesson for Israel from the debate inside the EU over the future of Jerusalem. Inside Israeli governments there is the expression that "the immediate always puts off the important." In this case, because Israeli diplomacy is always dealing with urgent issues - from the Goldstone report to the latest Iranian nuclear decisions - as a result it does not always address long-term Israeli interests such as keeping Jerusalem united. True, Sweden had a number of important opponents to its proposals on Jerusalem in the EU, like the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, France, Romania, Hungary, Poland, and Italy. But it is a mistake to take international support for Israel's positions among these states for granted.

What is needed is an ongoing Israeli diplomatic effort for Jerusalem, underlining Israel's legal rights and its role as the protector of the holy sites. The arguments to support a united Jerusalem must be raised by Israeli ambassadors in all the capitals where they serve and not wait for a crisis to develop, like the current struggle inside the EU. The Jewish people restored their majority in Jerusalem in 1864, well before the British Mandate. The League of Nations established Jerusalem as part of the Jewish National Home. Stephen Schwebel, who would eventually become President of the International Court of Justice in The Hague, wrote in 1970 that "Israel has better title in the territory of what was Palestine, **including the whole of Jerusalem** [emphasis added], than do Jordan and Egypt."⁵ There is a huge irony that Europeans, who

remember the removal of the Berlin Wall in 1989 as a historical turning point for their continent, now advocate the re-division of Jerusalem between two separate states.

For the Palestinians, the demand for a capital in eastern Jerusalem has become a mantra that they repeat at every opportunity. Unfortunately, European states, which once sought to protect the holy sites of Christianity in Jerusalem, today appear to be oblivious to what would happen to their churches were the Old City of Jerusalem to be given to a Palestinian regime under the influence of Hamas. Indeed, prior to the EU decision on the Swedish draft, prominent former European officials like Chris Patten, Romano Prodi, Hubert Vedrine, and Lionel Jospin lobbied on behalf of the Swedish draft and the adoption of a more pro-Palestinian EU position on Jerusalem. If Israel does not make a concerted effort to protect its rights in Jerusalem, then even its closest friends in Europe will assume that at the end of the day, Israel will concede those rights and agree to the policies that Europe is proposing.

Notes 1. Barak Ravid, "EU Draft Document on Division of Jerusalem," *Ha'aretz*, December 2, 2009, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1131988.html>.

2. "Council Conclusions on the Middle East Peace Process," Council of the European Union, 2985th Foreign Affairs Council Meeting, Brussels, December 8, 2009,

http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/gena/105545.pdf.

3. "Letter Dated 25 March 1999 from the Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations Addressed to the Secretary-General," UN General Assembly / Security Council, A/53/879, S/1999/334.

4. Mikael Tossavainen, "Swedish Reactions to the Anti-Israel Blood Libel Report," *Jerusalem Issue Brief*, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs/Institute for Contemporary Affairs, Vol. 9, No. 12, October 15, 2009,

http://www.jcpa.org/JCPA/Templates/ShowPage.asp?DRIT=1&DBID=1&LNGID=1&TMID=111&FID=382&PID=0&IID=3102&TTL=Swedish_Reactions_to_the_Anti-Israel_Blood_Libel_Report.

5. Stephen Schwebel, "What Weight to Conquest," *American Journal of International Law*, 64, 1970.

Building Peace Without Obama's Interference

By Tom Gross The Wall Street Journal

December 2, 2009

A promising, independent Palestine is quietly being developed, with Israeli assistance. It is difficult to turn on a TV or radio or pick up a

newspaper these days, without finding some pundit or other deploring the dismal prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace or the dreadful living conditions of

the Palestinians. Even supposedly neutral news reporters regularly repeat this sad tale. "Very little is changing for the Palestinian people on the ground," I heard BBC World Service Cairo correspondent Christian Fraser tell listeners three times in a 45 minute period the other evening.

In fact nothing could be further from the truth. I had spent that day in the West Bank's largest city, Nablus. The city is bursting with energy, life and signs of prosperity, in a way I have not previously seen in many years of covering the region.

As I sat in the plush office of Ahmad Aweidah, the suave British-educated banker who heads the Palestinian Securities Exchange, he told me that the Nablus stock market was the second best-performing in the world so far in 2009, after Shanghai. (Aweidah's office looks directly across from the palatial residence of Palestinian billionaire Munib al-Masri, the wealthiest man in the West Bank.)

Later I met Bashir al-Shakah, director of Nablus's gleaming new cinema, where four of the latest Hollywood hits were playing that day. Most movies were sold out, he noted, proudly adding that the venue had already hosted a film festival since it opened in June.

Wandering around downtown Nablus the shops and restaurants I saw were full. There were plenty of expensive cars on the streets. Indeed I counted considerably more BMWs and Mercedes than I've seen, for example, in downtown Jerusalem or Tel Aviv.

And perhaps most importantly of all, we had driven from Jerusalem to Nablus without going through any Israeli checkpoints. The government of Benjamin Netanyahu has removed them all since the Israeli security services (with the encouragement and support of President George W. Bush) were allowed, over recent years, to crush the intifada, restore security to the West Bank and set up the conditions for the economic boom that is now occurring. (There was one border post on the return leg of the journey, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, but the young female guard just waved me and the two Palestinians I was traveling with, through.)

The shops and restaurants were also full when I visited Hebron recently, and I was surprised to see villas comparable in size to those on the Cote d'Azur or Bel Air had sprung up on the hills around the city. Life is even better in Ramallah, where it is difficult to get a table in a good restaurant. New apartment buildings, banks, brokerage firms, luxury car dealerships and health clubs are to be seen. In Qalqilya, another West Bank city that was previously a hotbed of terrorists and bomb-makers, the first ever strawberry crop is being harvested in time to cash in on the lucrative Christmas markets in Europe. Local Palestinian farmers have been trained

by Israeli agriculture experts and Israel supplied them with irrigation equipment and pesticides.

A new Palestinian city, Ruwabi, is to be built soon north of Ramallah. Last month, the Jewish National Fund, an Israeli charity, helped plant 3,000 tree seedlings for a forested area the Palestinian planners say they would like to develop on the edge of the new city. Israeli experts are also helping the Palestinians plan public parks and other civic amenities.

Outsiders are beginning to take note of the turnaround too. The official PLO Wafa news agency reported last week that the 3rd quarter of 2009 witnessed near-record tourism in the Palestinian Authority, with 135,939 overnight hotel stays in 89 hotels that are now open. Almost half the guests come from the U.S or Europe.

Palestinian economic growth so far this year—in a year dominated by economic crisis elsewhere—has been an impressive 7% according to the IMF, though Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayad, himself a former World Bank and IMF employee, says it is in fact 11%, partly helped along by strong economic performances in neighboring Israel.

In Gaza too, the shops and markets are crammed with food and goods. But while photos from last Friday's Palestine Today newspaper, for example, depict sumptuous Eid celebrations, these are not the pictures you are ever likely to see on the BBC or Le Monde or the New York Times. No, Gaza is not like a "concentration camp," nor is the "humanitarian crisis in Gaza is on the scale of Darfur," as British journalist Lauren Booth (who is also Tony Blair's sister-in-law) has said.

In June, the Washington Post's Jackson Diehl related how Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas had told him why he had turned down Ehud Olmert's offer last year to create a Palestinian state on 97% of the West Bank (with 3% of pre-1967 Israeli land being added to make up the shortfall). "In the West Bank we have a good reality," Abbas told Diehl. "The people are living a normal life," he added in a rare moment of candor to a Western journalist.

Nablus stock exchange head Ahmad Aweidah went further in explaining to me why there is no rush to declare statehood, saying ordinary Palestinians need the IDF to help protect them from Hamas, as their own security forces aren't ready to do so by themselves yet.

The truth is that an independent Palestine is now quietly being built, with Israeli assistance. So long as the Obama administration and European politicians don't clumsily meddle as they have in the past and make unrealistic demands for the process to be completed more quickly than it can be, I am confident the outcome will be a positive one. (The last time an American president—Bill Clinton in

2000—tried to hurry things along unrealistically, it merely resulted in blowing up in everybody's faces—literally—and set back hopes for peace by some years.)

Israelis and Palestinians may never agree on borders that will satisfy everyone. But that doesn't mean they won't live in peace. Not all Germans and French agree who should control Alsace Lorraine. Poles and Russians, Slovenes and Croats, Britons and Irish, and peoples all over the world, have

Prisoner swap is risky deal

By Uri Dromi The Miami Herald December 4, 2009

As these lines are written, a prisoners swap deal is under way, in which Israeli POW Gilad Shalit, held by Hamas in Gaza for more than 1,000 days, will be exchanged for close to 1,000 Palestinian prisoners. The debate here over this is heated.

Last week, on my way to work, I passed by the street in Jerusalem leading to the prime minister's mansion. A tent has been standing there for the past three years, with people wearing T-shirts with Shalit's picture and picketing with flyers, like "Gilad is still alive," etc.

While waiting for the light to turn green, a boy approached my car and pointed to the sign he was carrying: "Honk for the release of Gilad Shalit." My heart said Honk, but my head said Don't. As much as I want this boy to return to his family, I'm worried that this would only encourage more kidnapping and blackmail. Not to mention the price: the release of those murderers, namely, more potential innocent Israeli victims in the future.

In Judaism, redeeming the captive is very important: "You shall not stand idly by the blood of your brother." (Lev. 19:16). However, not at all costs. One of the old Jewish sages has already cautioned against it. Rabbi Meir Ben Baruch, better known as the Maharam of Rotenburg, was one of the leading rabbis of Germany in the 13th century, when King Rudolph started persecuting the Jews.

Dangerous precedent He arrested the Maharam, hoping to get a huge ransom for him, and indeed, the Jews started to collect money for that purpose. Yet the Maharam, from his cell, issued a directive strictly prohibiting such a move, by citing the Jewish religious law: "It is forbidden to redeem captives for more than their worth." He pointed out that setting a precedent in his case would endanger all Torah sages, who would become instruments of kidnapping and extortion.

However, the current deal is probably going to be carried out anyway, because the precedent was set a long time ago. In January 1957, following the Sinai Campaign, Israel returned to Egypt some 5,000 POWs for one Israeli pilot, Jonathan Etkes. Something of the sort happened in the Six-Day War,

border disputes. But that doesn't keep them from coexisting with one another. Nor—so long as partisan journalists and human rights groups don't mislead Western politicians into making bad decisions—will it prevent Israelis and Palestinians from doing so.

Mr. Gross is a Middle East analyst and former Jerusalem correspondent for the Sunday Telegraph.

which prompted President Ronald Reagan, a great friend of Israel, to tell the following joke:

In the aftermath of the Six-Day War, Israeli soldiers were offered \$1,000 for each Egyptian POW they would bring in. Two Israeli soldiers set out for the Sinai desert, looking for POWs. Night fell, and they went to sleep. As one of them woke up early in the morning, he realized that they had been surrounded by no less than 10,000 Egyptians. He grabbed the sleeve of his sleeping friend. "Moyshe, wake up, we're rich!"

The difference is that then we were talking about POWs, while today we are asked, in exchange of Gilad Shalit, to release terrorists who executed or sent others to execute vile atrocities against civilians.

Intifada leaders Yet even with regards to terrorists, the precedent has been set. In 1985, Israel released 1,150 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for three Israeli soldiers who had been abducted by the Jibril organization. Many of the released prisoners went back to their bloody business, becoming the leaders of the first intifada.

Why can't Israel act like the United States, which doesn't make any deals about its POWs?

When American pilot Michael Durant was captured by General Aidid's men in Mogadishu in 1993 (Black Hawk Down), former U.S. Ambassador Robert Oakley sent the following message to Aidid: "[W]e have to rescue him, and whether we have the right place or the wrong place, there's going to be a fight with your people. The minute the guns start again, all restraint on the U.S. side goes. Just look at the stuff coming in here now. An aircraft carrier, tanks, gunships ... the works. Once the fighting starts, all this pent-up anger is going to be released. This whole part of the city will be destroyed, men, women, children, camels, cats, dogs, goats, donkeys, everything. . . . That would really be tragic for all of us, but that's what will happen." Durant was released right away.

Yet Israel is not mighty America, which can make its own rules. And there is also the Israeli ethos of never leaving our fighting men and women behind. Once they know every possible effort will be

made to rescue them, their motivation will know no limits. But again, at what price?

Back to that street in Jerusalem. As the light remained agonizingly red, the boy came closer, obviously wondering what was the matter with me, why I wasn't honking my horn. Finally, I produced

the weakest honking possible. The light turned green, and I quickly drove away. If the boy I left behind was perplexed by my honking, so was I.

Uri Dromi is a columnist based in Jerusalem.

Israel's Settlement Freeze

By Michael B. Oren The Wall Street Journal December 7, 2009

Prime Minister Netanyahu has broken with his party to restart the peace process. Distracted by the crucial debate over Afghanistan, many Americans may have missed a pivotal event in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. On Nov. 25, Israel's government announced a 10-month construction freeze in Judea and Samaria—the areas generally known as the West Bank. Though some projects already begun will be completed and essential public buildings like medical clinics and schools will be approved, no new housing permits will be issued.

"We hope that this decision will help launch meaningful peace negotiations," declared Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu "and finally end the conflict between the Palestinians and Israel." The Obama administration praised the decision and recognized its significance. Special Envoy George Mitchell hailed the decision as "substantial," and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called it "unprecedented."

By contrast, Palestinian leaders rejected Israel's gesture as grossly inefficient. Without an indefinite cessation of all Jewish building in the West Bank and Jerusalem, they say, peace talks cannot resume.

What Mr. Mitchell and Mrs. Clinton understand, but what the Palestinians miss, is that Mr. Netanyahu has shown more flexibility on this issue than any previous head of his Likud Party, which is staunchly pro-settlement. Indeed, he has gone further than any prime minister in limiting a right that many Israelis consider incontestable and a vital component of their national security.

Twice—in 1948 and 1967—the West Bank served as the staging ground for large-scale attacks against Israel. While defending itself, Israel captured the territory and reunited with its ancestral homeland: Haifa is not in the Bible, but Bethlehem, Hebron, and Jericho decidedly are. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis rushed to resettle their tribal land.

These communities widened Israel's borders, which at points are a mere eight miles wide. American policy makers recognized Israel's need for defensible borders and, in November 1967, they supported U.N. Resolution 242, which called for withdrawals from "territories" captured in the war,

but not from "all the territories" or even "the territories."

All successive Israeli governments supported the settlements. Only with the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords did then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin agree to restrain construction in outlying communities that he considered unnecessary for Israel's defense. But the settlements continued to expand. Meanwhile the peace process progressed. The Palestinians never made a construction freeze in Jerusalem and the settlements a precondition for talks—until earlier this year.

Mr. Netanyahu initially responded that Jews, like all people, can build legally in Jerusalem, and that it's unreasonable to disallow settlers from building even an extra room for a newborn. Still, he promised not to establish new settlements, not to appropriate additional land for existing ones, nor even to induce Israelis to move to them. Yet the Palestinians balked. The peace process was moribund, awaiting an intrepid stroke.

Mr. Netanyahu has now taken that initiative. By suspending new Israeli construction in all of the West Bank, the prime minister has done what none of his predecessors, including Rabin, ever suggested.

At home, Mr. Netanyahu's decision has been fiercely criticized, even by some members of his own party. The Knesset has considered a vote of no-confidence in his leadership. And the most recent poll shows that more Israelis oppose the freeze than support it.

The prime minister has nevertheless persisted—his coalition is among the strongest and most representative in Israel's history—but the opportunity generated by his action will not endure indefinitely. Together with the Obama administration, which has repeatedly asserted its commitment to restarting talks without preconditions and to achieving a permanent two-state solution, Israelis hope that Palestinians will once again join them in talks.

By taking risks and accomplishing the unprecedented, Mr. Netanyahu has demonstrated his commitment to peace. Now the Palestinians must match that dedication and seize this propitious moment.

Mr. Oren is Israel's ambassador to the United States.

Bibi's bad week By Caroline Glick

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu weakened Israel this week. And he did so for no good reason.

Thursday's headlines told the tale. The day after Netanyahu bowed to US pressure and announced a total freeze on Jewish construction in Judea and Samaria for ten months, Yediot Aharonot reported that the Obama administration now wants Israel to release a thousand Fatah terrorists from prison.

The Americans also want Israel to allow US-trained, terror supporting Fatah paramilitary forces to deploy in areas that are currently under Israeli military control. Moreover, the Americans are demanding that Israel surrender land in the strategically crucial Jordan Valley to Fatah.

And these are just American preconditions for starting negotiations with the Palestinians. According to Yediot, if those talks ever begin, the White House will demand that Israel accept a Palestinian state in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and Gaza and agree to ethnically cleanse all the areas of Jews.

So far from winning American support or at least causing the White House to ease its bullying, US President Barack Obama sees Netanyahu's decision to implement a militarily irrational, bigoted policy of prohibiting Jews from building in Israel's heartland as a drop in the bucket.

The truth is that Israel should not be in the business of negotiating the right of Israeli cities and villages to exist and prosper. The notion that it is acceptable to demand that Jews not be permitted to live in Judea and Samaria - or anywhere else in the world - is not a notion that Israel should countenance.

That being said, putting the so-called "settlements" genie back in the bottle is a tall order. After all, Israel agreed to place it on the table in the 1993 Oslo agreements and made its willingness to dry out Jewish communities explicit with its acceptance of the so-called road map in 2004. To take Israeli communities off the agenda it would be necessary to repudiate these deals.

Given what it will take to remove Jewish communities from the negotiations chopping block, it makes sense that Netanyahu has not moved in that direction since taking office. But willingness to discuss these communities is not the same as giving them away for nothing. In discussing the dispositions of these towns and villages, at a minimum Netanyahu should have taken advantage of the fact that the Americans, the Europeans and the Arabs all consider the so-called "settlements" to be the most important obstacle to peace.

Netanyahu should have capitalized on US Congressman and Obama ally Robert Wexler's statement from last July that in exchange for freezing Jewish construction, Israel would gain normalized relations with all Arab League member states. Were

The Jerusalem Post November 27, 2009

Israel to see 20 Arab embassies opening in exchange for a temporary freeze in Jewish construction, one could say that Netanyahu's massive concession was justified.

But Netanyahu decided to give away this high card - Israel's ace of spades as it were - for free. Actually, he paid for it.

The Arabs rejected Wexler's offer in July. And five seconds after Netanyahu announced the freeze the Palestinians proclaimed his unprecedented prohibition on Jewish building worthless. But then unlike Netanyahu, the Palestinians are playing their cards wisely. Why should they accept his move as sufficient when they know the Americans will demand still more concessions from him?

And sure enough, moments after Netanyahu's speech, former senator George Mitchell stood before the cameras in Washington and said that his move is too little to impress the likes of Mitchell and Obama.

Many commentators claim that Netanyahu's announcement Wednesday night was his way of balancing his desire to release 450 Hamas murderers from prison in exchange for hostage Gilad Schalit with an equal concession to Fatah. That is, the freeze was required, it is argued, because without a move of this magnitude, the terrorists-for-hostage deal would destroy Fatah completely.

This view is the quintessence of the notion that two wrongs make a right.

In an interview with Channel 2 Wednesday night, Defense Minister Ehud Barak admitted that in negotiating Schalit's release, Netanyahu has gone well beyond former prime minister Ehud Olmert's offers to Hamas. With Netanyahu and Likud in the opposition loudly proclaiming the truth that any deal with Hamas will imperil untold numbers of Israelis, Olmert didn't dare accept Hamas's demand that Israel release its most brutal mass murderers from its prisons. But now that Netanyahu and Likud are in the driver's seat, they are only too happy to accept what was previously unacceptable.

By Thursday, it appeared that the Iranians and the Syrians had placed the proposed swap on the back burner. But even if the deal presently being discussed doesn't go through, Netanyahu's moves on the issue to date have already weakened the country considerably.

Simply by agreeing to negotiate with Hamas, Netanyahu conferred legitimacy not only on the terror group, but on the act of taking hostages. After all, until Hamas had Schalit, no government in Israel was willing to cut a deal with it. But today, in the interest of making a deal, Israel has allowed Hamas commanders - including Schalit's captor Ahmad Jabari - safe passage to Egypt where they are feted by senior Egyptian officials and meet with other

senior terrorists. In so doing Israel has effectively accepted them as legitimate leaders.

Netanyahu's willingness to release murderers from prison also signs the death warrants of countless Israelis. The Schalit-obsessed local media insists that politicians who claim they oppose the deal must be willing to look Schalit's parents in the eyes and tell them that they will not "do what it takes" to bring Gilad home. But Schalit's parents and the 450-terrorists-for-one-hostage-swap champions in the media and in the Knesset need to be asked whether they will be willing to look the families of the next IDF hostages in the eye after they are abducted due to Israel's decision to spring murderers from prison in exchange for Schalit. So too, they should ask themselves what they will say to the families of the Israelis who will be murdered because of this deal.

Unfortunately, our foolish media elites and their lackeys in the government are incapable of recognizing that the deal with Hamas doesn't pit the Schalit family against the families of the Israelis that these prisoners already murdered. It places Noam and Aviva Schalit against the families of the still unidentified Israelis who will be murdered by these imprisoned terrorists in the future if they are allowed to see the light of day.

Even if the current negotiations end in failure, Netanyahu this week made clear that he is willing to conduct a massive release of terrorists in exchange for Israeli hostages. The message has been received by our enemies and they will make us pay for it with interest.

Finally, Netanyahu's willingness to spring terrorists from prison in exchange for Schalit weakens Israel's deterrent posture. This week The Jerusalem Post reported that the IDF has commissioned a study to figure out how to tell who has won in an inconclusive war against terrorists. It seems a shame that there is apparently such a dearth of common sense in the General Staff that the IDF needs someone from the outside to explain the facts of life to its generals.

Those facts, for instance, indicate that when you fight a war against a terrorist group that serves as a proxy for enemy regimes, and in the aftermath of the war the terror group takes over the government of its own country and its state sponsors build nuclear arsenals unhindered by your government and the international community as a whole, while your own generals and soldiers are threatened with indictments by UN war crimes tribunals, the terrorists have won and you have lost.

By the same token, apparently it is unclear to IDF Chief of General Staff Lt. Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi - who said this week that he cannot wait to greet Gilad at home - that by offering to release hundreds of terrorists for a hostage soldier, he is telling all the thousands of IDF troops who risk their lives every

day to arrest terrorists and fight them that they are risking their lives for nothing.

Why bother staging a middle-of-the-night raid in Nablus where your men are liable to be killed in order to arrest a terrorist if he's just going to be released from prison within a year or two in exchange for another soldier? In fact, why have an army at all? Perhaps we'd all be better off if we just paid our enemies protection money until they are ready to deliver the coup de grace.

But then, perhaps that's what Israel is doing today. On Tuesday Barak noted that whereas on the eve of the 2006 war Hizbullah had an arsenal of 14,000 rockets, today it has an arsenal of 50,000 rockets. His remarks might have been perceived as a warning that Israel is gearing up to take preemptive action against Hizbullah. But that perception would be wrong, unless what one had in mind was preemptive capitulation.

On Thursday it was reported that Israel is ready to transfer control over the northern half of Ghajar - the border town that is officially half in Israel and half in Lebanon - to UNIFIL forces. These would be the same UN forces that have done nothing to prevent Hizbullah from rearming and taking over the Lebanese government. These would be the same Italian-commanded UN forces that former Italian president Francesco Cossiga claims cut a deal with Hizbullah according to which UNIFIL turns a blind eye to Hizbullah's activities and in exchange, Hizbullah doesn't kill UNIFIL forces.

Since the 2006 war, the UN and the US have been bullying Israel to give up the northern half of Ghajar. Their pressure has come despite their sure knowledge that the moment IDF forces withdraw from the northern half of the town, it will again become a smuggling capital for drugs, terrorists, Hizbullah spies and ordnance. Barak and Netanyahu apparently are of the opinion that despite - or worse, perhaps due to - the growing dangers emanating from Hizbullah-controlled Lebanon, it is better for Israel to seek to curry favor with the UN and the US than to take the steps necessary to defend the country from Hizbullah.

This is the depressing message that Netanyahu and his merry band of ministers have communicated to the world this week. In the hopes of appeasing the unappeasable Obama administration, the government has adopted Obama's anti-Semitic policies against Jewish communities in Judea and Samaria. To win points with the imbecilic, unaccountable and irresponsible local media, Netanyahu has jeopardized the lives of untold numbers of Israelis by expressing his willingness to free hundreds of terrorist murderers from prison. And to placate the pro-Hizbullah UN, Israel has decided it is willing to further strengthen Hizbullah.

The mind reels at the thought of what next week may bring.