1. The intended objective of the Peace Process that began with the Oslo Accords 25 years ago was, as I remember it, to create two states – one for the Israelis, one for the Palestinians – living side by side in security, peace, democracy, and with social security. This objective has also been stated in declarations and resolutions of the United Nations and the European Union. What are the three reasons why an envisaged two-state solution has not been achieved so far?
**Yossi Alpher:** First, the original text of the Oslo I Accord (Declaration of Principles, DOP) did not specifically mention a two-state solution and Israeli Prime-Minister Yitzhak Rabin never endorsed a two-state solution. So, this was not necessarily the original Israeli objective. Second, in discussing final status the DOP unfortunately lumped together relatively solvable post-1967 Six-Day-War issues like “borders” and “security” with pre-1967 narrative issues like “holy places” and the “1948 refugees’ “right of return” that have proven intractable. Third, the DOP’s phased approach and the two sides’ decision that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed” proved too vulnerable both to violent interventions – a few by the Israeli right and many sponsored or condoned by the PLO leader, Yasser Arafat, himself – and to expansion by the dynamic Israeli settlement movement. Today no less than 10 percent of Israeli Jews live across the 1967 Green Line.

**Ghassan Khatib:** The two-state solution is the underlying assumption in the Peace Process. It is endorsed by almost every country in the world, including all EU governments and the US. It has not been achieved first of all because of the illegal Jewish settlement expansion in the occupied Palestinian territory, which led to the settling of three quarters of a million Israelis in the Occupied West Bank including East Jerusalem. Secondly, the change in the internal Israeli political landscape, which led to the decline of the peace camp in Israel and the election of parties to the Israeli Parliament (Knesset) that never supported a two-state solution and opposed the Oslo IAccord (DOP). Lastly, the weakness of the Palestinian side and its poor negotiating performance that ultimately led to flawed Israeli-Palestinian agreements.

2. Throughout the years, governments and envoys of the US, the EU, Russia and the United Nations, tried to mediate, support and finance the Israeli-Palestinian track. What are the reasons why this external support and mediation did not succeed?

**Ghassan Khatib:** First, the United States and Israel never allowed other countries, especially European states, to play any real role in mediation on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and always insisted on an American monopoly. Second, mediation was never consistent with international law, including United Nations Security Council resolutions such as 242 and 338, which consider the Palestinian territory that fell under Israeli control in 1967, to be under belligerent military occupation that needs to end. Finally, the Palestinian side allowed the US to monopolise mediation and did not lean enough on international legislation. The Palestinian leadership should have insisted on United Nations or international collective mediation that can be subject to international law.
Yossi Alpher: Third parties cannot be expected to understand the dynamics of the conflict more than the two parties themselves. By the time of the July 2000 Camp David peace summit meeting between US President Bill Clinton, Yasser Arafat, Leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, it was clear that even Israel was just beginning to understand what the Palestinians meant by “right of return” and “there never was a temple on the Temple Mount”: the Palestinians did not and do not accept Israel's historical roots in the region. The US and the Europeans still fail to understand any of this. Today, both Israel and the US support “economic peace” – a mistaken approach to a conflict that is historical, ideological and increasingly religious, but not economic. Furthermore, while the Trump administration's grasp of Middle East strategic dynamics is particularly poor, neither Barack Obama nor George W. Bush understood the region either. In view of these perceptual gaps, only an imposed solution might have worked, at least temporarily. However, the third parties were never prepared to confront Israel and the Arab world and brutally impose a solution.

3. Over the past 25 years, both of you invested your expertise in the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – your joint project of “bitterlemons”, to name but one example (shortly explained in added info box). From your personal experience, which issue has been the most frustrating, and which issue the most promising?

Ghassan Khatib: The most frustrating issue is the lack of accountability, the double standards and the treatment of Israel as a country above International law by the international community; for example, Israel is violating Palestinians’ rights by its illegal settlement policy, without any serious reaction from the United Nations. The most promising is that international public opinion, especially in Europe, is gradually becoming more balanced regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - one example is the vote by many parliaments across the world, including in Europe, to recognize Palestine as a state.

Yossi Alpher: The most frustrating issue is the Palestinians’ refusal or inability to confront the negative consequences for peace of their fundamental belief that the State of Israel was “born in sin” in 1948. The most promising issue is the capacity of so many on both sides to talk to one another. We learned from “bitterlemons” that this includes virtually all Israeli ultra-nationalist rightists.

4. If you were to think from the Palestinian point of view, what would you recommend the Palestinians do in future to improve their relationship with Israel?

Yossi Alpher: To consider the impossible: Hamas must reject violence and it
and the PLO must accept Israel as the legitimate state of the Jewish people with real cultural and historical roots in the Holy Land. A sustained Palestinian campaign to accept and present these points of view would have a profound effect on Israeli public opinion. Remember then Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in the Israeli Parliament (Knesset) in November 1977, saying publicly: “We were wrong to reject you”. He won the Israeli public over overnight, and two years later, the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty was signed.

5. If you were to think from the Israeli point of view, what would you recommend the Israelis do in future to improve their relationship with the Palestinians?

Ghassan Khatib: I would tell the Israelis that continuing their illegal settlement expansion policy is closing the door to a two-state solution, mainly because Israeli authorities are establishing infrastructure and Israeli population in land that is supposed to be part of the Palestinian State, thus eliminating future chances of peace and stability in our region. In addition, the Israeli settlement policy will compromise democracy and create a discriminative regime for Palestinians, as democracy contradicts with this discrimination reality that Israel is creating by forcing two communities to live in the same country, but under two sets of laws and systems.

6. Please tell us what needs to happen this year and next year in order to move towards a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Is there a viable alternative to the two-state solution?

Yossi Alpher: We need new Israeli, Palestinian and US leaders who have a deeper understanding of the conflict, a greater willingness to compromise, and public backing. But this won’t happen. The only conceivable exception could be an Israel-Hamas deal that stabilizes the Gaza Strip in a way that points toward some sort of progress.

Ghassan Khatib: The first step is to organize an international peace conference to establish new terms of reference that are consistent with international law, a conference that can agree on a framework and terms of reference that are consistent with the basic rights of the Palestinians, including their right of self-determination and independence. The second is to establish an international mechanism that will mediate fresh Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, and force the parties to avoid pre-emptive practices such as settlement expansion.

7. This year the Israelis celebrated 70 years of the foundation of their State of Israel, which is mirrored by the Palestinians’ Nakba Day. This year also
marks the 25th anniversary of the start of the Oslo Peace Process. What is the most realistic scenario for developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict this autumn and next year?

Ghassan Khatib: Realistically speaking, the only scenario expected in the next year is the continuity of the current situation with no major developments. The reason is that this status quo is very convenient for Israel, and Israel is able to maintain it. First, because it is too powerful in terms of its military, and second, because the United States and Europe are allowing Israel to continue its actions.

Yossi Alpher: The era of the Oslo-Peace-Process-approach is over. Sadly, Israelis and Palestinians find themselves sliding down a slippery slope towards an ugly, conflicted bi-national one-state reality. Israeli ultra-nationalism, Hamas Islamism and the West Bank-based PLO have all contributed to a failure to build a state. All other things being equal, this course of events will lead to a far worse reality in the decade ahead. Only a major regional cataclysm can “shuffle the cards” and change this. Eventually, this will happen.

8. What does this scenario mean for the role of the EU and Germany? What would you recommend?

Yossi Alpher: Europe has to adjust to the slippery slope reality: This requires less hand-wringing about the demise of the Oslo Peace Process and the two-state solution and more involvement in understanding and "managing" the slippery slope and devising ways to at least slow the deterioration until an opportunity for change presents itself.

Ghassan Khatib: This scenario will mean that the EU and Germany will remain marginal players in the Middle East conflict. Changing this sad political reality would require two things. First, the EU should stop treating Israel as a state above international law and hold Israel and the Palestinians equally accountable for any violation. Second, the EU should insist on political involvement, at least equal to its financial contribution, as the EU and European states are the biggest donors, while having the least significant political role and influence.

Yossi Alpher
Yossi Alpher is a consultant and writer on Israel-related strategic issues. Until recently, he was coeditor of the bitterlemons.net family of internet publications.

Alpher served in the Israel Defense Forces as an Intelligence officer, followed by service in the Mossad. From 1981 to 1995, he was associated with the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University, ultimately serving as director of center. From 1995 to 2000, he headed the American Jewish Committee's Israel-Middle East Office. In 2000 (during the Camp David talks), he served as Special Adviser to the Prime Minister of Israel, concentrating on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. His recent books are Periphery: Israel's Search for Middle East Allies (2015) and No End of Conflict: Rethinking Israel-Palestine (2016).

Ghassan Khatib
Ghassan Khatib is lecturer in Cultural Studies and Contemporary Arab Studies at Birzeit University. Previously, he served as director of the Palestinian Authority Government Media Center (2009-2012), Minister of Labor in 2002 and Minister of Planning (2005-2006). Khatib was Vice-President for Community Outreach at Birzeit University (2006-2009), and founded and directed the Jerusalem Media and Communication Center, which specializes in research, opinion polling and media activities. He was a member of the Palestinian delegation for the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference in 1991 and the subsequent bilateral negotiations in Washington from 1991-93. For 11 years, Khatib also co-founded and co-directed the bitterlemons publications, a series of Palestinian-Israeli internet-based political publications. Khatib holds a PhD in Middle East politics from the University of Durham, and is author of *Palestinian Politics and the Middle East Peace Process: Consensus and Competition in the Palestinian Negotiation Team*.

The bitterlemons family

The bitterlemons family of internet publications was a primary engine of Israeli-Palestinian, Israel-Arab and general Middle East political dialogue during the 2001-2012 period. At its peak, it consisted of a portal, bitterlemons.net, and five websites: bitterlemons.org, bitterlemons-international.org, bitterlemons-api.org, bitterlemons-dialogue.org, and bitterlemons-books.org. Subscriptions to weekly internet publications were free. Books could be downloaded for free. Participant writers hailed from all Arab countries, the Palestinian Territory, Israel, Iran, and Turkey, as well as non-Middle East countries.
bitterlemons was founded, co-edited and partially written by Ghassan Khatib, a Palestinian, and Yossi Alpher, an Israeli. Although the project closed in 2012, the websites remain accessible and constitute a valuable archive of Middle East political and strategic thinking.

PROJECTS

Strategies for the EU Neighbourhood