

Focusing on the Wrong Election in Israel

By Stanley A. Weiss

SDEROT, Southern Israel - In much of the world, school ends with the sound of a bell: class dismissed. In this small city three miles from the Gaza border, school often ends with the wail of a siren: rockets are on their way. Students have about 16 seconds to find cover.

They've had lots of practice. Since Israel withdrew its military from Gaza in 2005, more than 8,000 Hamas rockets have fallen here. Almost all miss their targets, but rattle the nerves: over 30 percent of the children here suffer from post traumatic stress disorder.

Tired of the barrage, hundreds of families moved ten miles north to the city of Ashkelon. The rockets followed: this time, longer-range, Iranian-made Grad missiles. Visiting these communities lends new perspective to the proportionality debate: if Hamas were a better shot, the death toll would quickly escalate here, too.

Local papers report that an 18-month cease-fire between Israel and Hamas is near, but nobody here believes they are safe as long as Hamas rules Gaza. The last cease-fire, in mid-January—that ended Israel's horrific three-week campaign in Gaza—was broken repeatedly.

Two hours before I arrived in Ashkelon—seven days before the Israeli election—a Grad missile landed on the outskirts of town.

The same day, Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu arrived, followed by ultra-nationalist Avigdor Lieberman. Both spoke of security. Neither mentioned the mammoth blue-roofed desalination plant that sits on the edge of Ashkelon—the largest plant of its kind in the world, able to convert the equivalent of 250 million liter-size bottles of salt water into drinking water each day. The promise it represents for water-starved people worldwide is staggering—yet, it remains just a footnote to violence.

And that's the problem. How do you focus on long-term growth with three missiles landing each day? The same question is asked in the West Bank, where Palestinian business owners wonder how any infrastructure for growth can be built with 500 checkpoints.

Israel's options in Gaza are few, ruled as it is by an enemy sworn to Israel's destruction. Israel can choose to live with the rockets; attack again and invite another public relations disaster; or take back and govern Gaza with its bombed infrastructure and its many destitute refugees—a chilling prospect to any Israeli politician.

With no peace process in place and no partner with whom to negotiate, many say, the two-state solution is dead. After all, wasn't *that* the message of the election? That the public has lost its appetite for peace?

No so fast, says Sari Nusseibeh, the widely respected president of Al-Quds University in Jerusalem. He tells me that critics are focusing on the wrong election.

The issue is not that Israel has new leadership uninterested in peace. The issue is that America has a new President *very* interested in peace, who understands that the U.S. will have little influence with Iran—and by extension, little ability to exit Iraq peaceably—without a working partnership with the less radicalized nations of the Arab League.

But as long as images of new violence from Gaza stir anger across the Muslim world, that kind of partnership will be impossible.

Remember: what made near-peace possible in 2000 was not Hamas' absence, but America's presence. In the waning days of his Administration, former President Bill Clinton helped forge the only peace plan ever embraced by Israelis, Palestinians, Americans—and the Arab League. But by the time Yasser Arafat finally said "yes" 18 months later, Clinton and Barak were out, and peace was gone.

Much has happened since then. But Nusseibeh, whom I met with in Jerusalem, where he served until December 2002 as the representative of the Palestinian National Authority, has good reason to believe a two-state solution is still possible: in 2003, he and an Israeli partner collected more than 200,000 signatures from both sides toward that end.

Nusseibeh believes the U.S. should present the leaders of both Israel and the PNA with a two-state framework. Gilead Sher, Israel's Chief Negotiator at those 2000 talks, agrees, and suggests rooting it in the Clinton parameters already embraced by both sides.

Nusseibeh envisions that the two leaders not be asked to accept, reject or negotiate the plan—but rather, to act as middlemen charged with putting the plan for a vote in their respective communities. For the plan to become active, both sides must vote "yes."

In Israel, a mature democracy, the vehicle for that vote should be a referendum. On the Palestinian side, it should be an election, with the plan constituting the current leadership's political platform. Hamas and all other parties can participate. Such an election would engage the population—and the Palestinian people at large—in an honest debate about the future, while openly committing the political leadership to peace.

The question since the February 10 election has been: will U.S. special envoy George Mitchell be able to coax Israelis and Palestinians to negotiate for peace? This solution bypasses both of them by making a request they cannot refuse: ask the people. For families in Gaza, that may be the only way to build a future of hope. For the families of Sderot and Ashkelon, that may be the way to ensure a future without rockets.