

Israel and Arabia, Jew and Muslim

To an evangelical Christian friend: Pensées du jour, 19 November 2012 JND

The fundamental problem is religious. Whichever side you favour, that seems obvious:

The Jews see Eretz Yisrael as the land they believe was given them by God 4,000 years ago. They cannot compromise that belief. It is that fundamentalist faith that drives them to immigrate and to build settlements in the West Bank so that the land they win can never be denied them. The belief of the Hasidics gains traction with moderate opinion since Jewry in general is determined to prevent their country being overrun. They remember in particular the hatred of European Pogroms culminating in the German Holocaust. One can well understand that. They are supported by the US, especially the southern Baptists, for whom notions of Armageddon and Christ's final victory depend (they believe, and perhaps you believe) on the re-establishment of the Chosen People in the Promised Land.

The Muslim Arabs see the land as theirs. They remember the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement immortalised in the film Lawrence of Arabia by which the West split up the Arab lands; Balfour's famous declaration in favour of "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people"; the failure of the British Mandate in Palestine to stand up to the Stern Gang and the Irgun, allowing Zionist terrorists to overrun the area and force British withdrawal; the eventual establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. So the more-or-less nomadic Arabs were gradually, completely and finally displaced just as their predecessors were by Joshua and Caleb all those years ago. Then the modern day Arabs, who are not very good at conventional warfare, were humiliated in the two wars they fought and quickly lost: the six-day war in 1967 and then the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Those humiliations have made them even more bitter: bitter at defeat, and bitter for their own failure.

Since then the Jews have exacerbated Arab hatred and despair with their Zionist settlement policy. The State of Israel has always fought strongly to defend the territory they hold: both of the land ceded to them in 1948 by the UN, and of the West Bank of the River Jordan captured in battle since that time.

I was working in Jeddah on 6 June 1982 when Israel invaded the southern part of Lebanon. I stood in a pearl shop in the Jeddah Souk, watching the Lebanese owner cry. Why? He was listening on the radio to a live broadcast of the Israeli invasion of his country which led to its occupation of southern Lebanon for almost twenty years. Before that the Israelis had taken over the Golan Heights, Syrian Territory. Now the Israelis have built their wall, higher than the Berlin Wall, and control the movement of Arabs between house and farm, splitting families just as happened in Berlin. So the Arabs are fearful, despairing, desolate, and disconsolate. The Gazans elected Hamas, but then the West would not recognise Hamas, the democratically elected government, as other than a terrorist force. Sad to relate, we are not so keen on democracy when the people elect people we don't like.

Sure, the Gazan Arabs are attacking Israel with hundreds of rockets. So the Israelis are attacking the Gazans with bombs, and seem likely to invade again. Some will say these escalations have to do with Israeli elections and the wish of Netanyahu to 'show strength'. I wonder where that policy will take him, in the end? Do you not weep for the Arabs as much as for the Jews? The sadness now must be the likely annihilation of so many from both sides. The IDF will invade Gaza. Iran will enter the conflict. Even Egypt will act. This will all impinge on the disaster in Syria. Turkey will be dragged in. Lebanon will become unstable.

You were there in the eastern Mediterranean briefly, before you had your conversion. I wonder what you really think about all this; what your strong evangelical faith tells you about it all? Perhaps just to pray.

Here is one glimmer of hope. It is of the Jewish musician Daniel Barenboim who has established the West Eastern Divan Orchestra: Arabs and Jews playing together in perfect harmony, playing Beethoven, who was a German. Listen to them [here](#) in a three minute recording on YouTube: Daniel Barenboim conducts the orchestra in rehearsal; he speaks of his belief in the possibility for peace; and orchestra members extol the opportunity for personal respect between peoples.

So I say again: there can be no two-state solution. I believe we should all pray for one state, with Jews and Muslims living peaceably together. Yet I fancy even God himself will have difficulty bringing that about.