

LÁSZLÓ ANDOR  
interviews YOSSI BEILIN

## We need courage to bring peace to the Middle East

**László Andor:** *As an Israeli politician with a distinguished career and experience in politics and peace negotiations, you are exceptionally well-placed to assess the current crisis and the tragic developments in Israel and offer your views to the readers of the Progressive Yearbook. How does the current tragic crisis compare with previous ones in Israel?*

**Yossi Beilin:** I don't have a proper answer because I cannot compare the current situation to anything I remember. Maybe you need a broader perspective to see things. But, in my view, the current situation only resembles 9/11. It reminds me of the feeling of the Americans before 9/11 when they thought that they were safe, that they were an island, and that nobody would ever try to assault their own territory. And then suddenly everything was endangered. So many people were killed in the Twin Towers and in the Pentagon, and even the White House could have been destroyed. And then there was such a deep feeling of vulnerability, which nobody expected.

Eventually, of course, the Israeli heads of intelligence and the army will have to resign. There were some axioms about the enemy's ability to do something like that. All the new technology and the investments that were made in defence, all this didn't work.

Hamas is everybody's enemy. Even of those countries in the Arab world which are now criticising Israel. I know most of their leaders, and I know what they told me about Hamas in the past. They were the ones who warned me personally, saying to be very careful with Hamas. They told me you are too nice to them; you must be tougher because they are ISIS. Especially the peace camps are trying to find a common denominator, saying that we must work together, asking "What do you really want? Can we compromise?" But there are people who really don't want to talk to you.

In the past, after the Geneva Initiative was signed, there was a kind of funeral on Fridays. Every Friday for three months, they would march from the mosque to the big square in Gaza with the coffin of Yasser Abed Rabbo, my partner on the Palestinian side, and mine. Because peaceniks are Hamas' biggest enemies, because Hamas doesn't want anything;

it doesn't want a two-state solution. All the things that we and the moderate Palestinians would like to have, for them, would be the worst solution. This is why it is so difficult to find a precedent because, usually, people want something from you when there is animosity; they want to get some part of their land, recognition or whatever. But they don't need any recognition. They don't want any land.

**LA:** *It is very difficult to speak, at this moment, of peace, but since you were very active in the Oslo process, I would like to ask you to look back to that period. Perhaps this was the last time when there was hope, and people believed that there would be some kind of compromise, some kind of lasting, sustainable solution. Can we take any lessons or inspiration from the period of the Oslo process?*

**YB:** One of the most important lessons is that one should not be enchanted by the majorities who want peace, and who will support peace. But one should think about the minorities, who will endanger their own lives to thwart the efforts of the peacemakers. I think that we did not understand this. It is as simple as that. It is obvious that people who are zealots and ready to endanger their own lives will do whatever they can, even things that you don't think about, like what Baruch Goldstein did in 1994 in the Cave of the Patriarchs, where he killed 29 Palestinian worshippers – an Israeli doctor! Why? He believed that we were traitors. And then, after the 40 days of the Muslim mourning period, the terrorist attacks began with the suicide bombings in Afula and Hadera, where dozens of people were killed.

So, if you ask me, it is not that the 1990s were happy years. In February 1994, the massacre in Hebron was a kind of a 'black swan', which surprised us, which we didn't expect. We expected something else: demonstrations or roadblocks, things like that. That was the beginning of the animosities that are accompanying us. But to speak about peace, usually you speak about peace after a war. Most of the peace treaties that we know from history were signed after wars. Not after a hundred years of peace and love. The world, in many ways, gave up on us until recently because of the Netanyahu leadership. On the Palestinian side, you have an old guy who has become a dictator, with very weak machinery and without real followers. So, as there is no war, and there is no fire all the time, and the world has other conflicts to deal with; people were not ready to listen to us. When we – Palestinians and Israelis – came to Europe a few months ago, suggesting the idea of an Israeli-Palestinian confederation, we were not heard.

I can compare this, for example, to the Geneva Initiative in 2003. The whole world was ready to listen to us, although it was an informal draft. Now, when we came up with the idea of a confederation, people did not listen to us, because they gave up on peace in the Middle East, at least for a while, including President Biden. And now you see that the whole world is here in the Middle East. Every prime minister, every foreign minister, is coming and talking to the Palestinians, and talking to us, and asking us "What can we do?" And you are interviewing me. This means that the world understands that we are living in a very dangerous place, which may explode tomorrow at any time, although we know the solutions for all the issues.

In the last 30 years, we have been working formally and informally to find solutions for all those things that were considered unsolvable: Jerusalem, the refugees, the border and so on. And we found solutions, which means that people of peace on both sides can easily and quickly find solutions. I believe you don't need more than one year to finish the work. For example, in Geneva, we had 500 pages of annexes: on water, on the compensation for the refugees, everything, the environment, you name it. I mean, I'm not saying that the decision-makers of the future will take it as it is, but the material is there. You don't have to invent; we know the solutions.

**LA:** *You mentioned Benjamin Netanyahu, and I would like to ask you how much depends on the leaders, because in the 1990s you also worked with Yitzhak Rabin, you worked with Shimon Peres. And what is the importance of having an inspirational leader?*

**YB:** Although you cannot dismiss other factors, there is nothing more important than the leaders. You know, after the Camp David initiative, the failed attempt to make peace in 2000, I met with President Bill Clinton. He told me how he saw the Camp David summit, because I was not there. President Clinton told me that at a certain moment, Yasser Arafat was made an offer and, after reading it, he went to President Clinton and told him "Mister President, if I accept your offer, you will come to my funeral". Then I asked Clinton, "So, what did you reply to him?" And he smiled and he said, "What could I say?" And then, after a moment, he asked me "What would you say to him?" And I said, with all due respect, "So what?" If you don't have courageous leaders who are ready to physically risk their lives to make peace, there will be no peace. The precedents of King Abdullah I of Jordan, President Sadat and others in our part of the world, who sacrificed their lives because they wanted to make peace. If you are not ready for that, forget it. All plans in the world will not help. Admittedly, it is very primitive for people to just risk their lives, but if they don't understand that peace for their nations is much more important than their own lives, nothing will happen.

**LA:** *Apart from the readiness of leaders and people who would negotiate, what else would be the preconditions for a new peace process?*

**YB:** No preconditions. You don't need to prepare for years, given that the two sides know each other by heart. Even Netanyahu and Abu Mazen know each other. It is not something new, as it was in Oslo, when, for the first time, we met with a PLO official, and we concluded that nobody had horns on their heads. This is no longer the case. We are veterans of talks. We know exactly what kind of people we are going to meet on the other side. So, we don't have to prepare ourselves. What we need is to be courageous enough and sit together and find a solution. The moment we put preconditions it is the end of the story.

**LA:** *You referred to the role of the United States, but also the Europeans. What could or should the US and the EU do better or differently to facilitate a new peace process?*

**YB:** It is very, very important that the subject is high on their agendas. This is the first thing. I mean, they need to come as they are doing now. Something they didn't do in the

recent past: go to the Palestinians; go to the Israelis; understand what the obstacles are; suggest meetings; suggest a kind of a Madrid conference. The Madrid conference, for example, was very important because it launched the whole process of bilateral talks for the first time and multilateral talks: on the economy, on the environment, on water and other things. The Oslo Agreement was part of the Madrid process. The mandate we got from Secretary Baker in 1991, – I was in opposition back then – but the mandate that the Palestinians and the Israelis got from Baker was to suggest a five-year autonomy for the Palestinians. So I went to my prime minister, Itzhak Rabin, and I told him, “We have a partner; let’s not waste our time on an interim agreement, which will be abused by the lunatics on both sides, and let’s go directly to a permanent agreement”. He replied: “I have to stick to Baker’s mandate”. So, the Madrid conference was a milestone. And it is not by chance that the many efforts began in Europe: from the Oslo talks, over the Swedish government, which hosted the negotiations between me and President Abbas between 1993 and 1995, to the Geneva Initiative, which was signed in Geneva. Now, don’t forget that the Americans were not involved, neither in Oslo nor in our peace with Jordan. It’s not that they were not involved daily. They didn’t know about it. They contributed a lot after the signing ceremony in convening other countries, the donor states, in offering financial support, and other aid. However, they did not initiate the process.

So, if you ask me what should be done, a lot can be done! And not all these things are written in books. I mean, the Oslo process was not written in any book. And believe me, I taught for many years in university, foreign affairs and political science, but I didn’t find anything like that. There was a readiness to be involved in non-conservative processes, secretly or openly, to invite Palestinians and Israelis together to seminars, just to talk, to talk between them, to talk to the public, to meet with the decision-makers. We used to do that. This is something that we used to do in the 1990s, a lot. This almost stopped, not totally, but almost. Now, this is not just nice to have. In these seminars, you not only develop relations between the parties – which is very important – but you share with the hosts the problems that you are having and the obstacles, and you may get answers to them. I mean, the knowledge in Europe of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is huge, and it is not used enough.

So, I would say pay attention to us, take us into account, and understand that if nothing happens, the worst may happen, as it happened on 7 October. And let us work together once we agree about your role, Europeans or Americans. I mean, in many ways, Europe gave up to the Americans. I heard it directly from the most influential people in Europe, in the EU, who told me “The Americans want to deal with it, and we will not move without their consent. It is up to them”. And the result was paralysis. The conflict in the Middle East was not on the agenda anymore. And in America, they were wondering what to do with Netanyahu. Nobody believes that he will make peace. Abu Mazen is an old dictator, and he sticks to the status quo, and with him also, we are not going to see a breakthrough in peace. So, we wait. But we don’t have the time to wait.<sup>1</sup>

1 This interview can be listened as a podcast on <https://feeps-europe.eu/podcasts/>.