

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Babel: Translating the Middle East
“Hiba Hussein: Peacemaking After Oslo”

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FEATURING

Hiba Hussein

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CSIS EXPERTS

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Jon Alterman: Hiba Hussein is a Ramallah-based lawyer who lives in Jerusalem. She served as a legal advisor to Palestinian peace negotiators for 30 years. About a year ago, she and longtime Israeli peace negotiator Yossi Beilin released a plan called the Holy Land Confederation, which seeks to lay the groundwork for a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Hiba, welcome to Babel. Zeid, welcome to Babel.

Hiba Hussein: Thank you very much for having me.

Jon Alterman: How has your life changed since October 7?

Hiba Hussein: My life has changed dramatically since October 7, in terms of witnessing the October 7 assault by Hamas on Israel first, and then the retaliation that took a tremendous force against the Gaza population. It wasn't just targeting Hamas; it was targeting the Gaza population. The loss of life, the destruction, and the drastic conditions—living conditions—the humanitarian crisis affects every Palestinian. We all live in stress, and we all are trying to find ways and means to help the parties reach a ceasefire.

Jon Alterman: From 2020 to 2022, you and Yossi Beilin worked with a team to create a plan for the Holy Land Confederation. What were the main elements of your plan?

Hiba Hussein: First, we should understand the background. Dr. Beilin and I believed that conflict management was not working, and we were going through periods of violence, escalation, and de-escalation of violence. The anticipation at the time was that there would be a third Intifada of sorts. Of course, lo and behold, we have October 7. But at the time, we realized that we have to reach a settlement of this conflict. This conflict cannot persist the way it had been because neither side was living and enjoying security and stability.

The eruption and escalation of violence was happening intermittently, and there was always a threat that things would get out of hand. Dr. Beilin and I thought that we needed to provide a concept that would be a facilitator to the two-state solution and an enabler to the two-state solution. We came up with this plan, realizing that the two people, the Palestinians and the Israelis, are very much attached to the land, the whole land. That's number one. Number two, neither side had ever tackled the narrative in a written manner.

Our proposal provides, in terms of the significant aspects of it, a chapter on the narrative—on the Palestinian-Arab narrative and on the Israeli-Jewish narrative. It's actually the first chapter. That was, in our opinion, an opening

to a unique document that would have started the conversation on the two-state solution. Number two, because both people have this deep attachment to the land, we believe that the confederation would provide the opportunity for people to enjoy the land and not leave the land.

We propose that the Israeli settlers who are in the West Bank settlements, who do not wish to leave or do not want to leave their homes, stay as permanent residents of the State of Palestine, and we will be swapping land. The land will be swapped, and in those lands that will not be swapped and will remain part of the State of Palestine, the settlers will have the option to stay as permanent residents of the State of Palestine.

This is all in the future now, but maybe we have an opportunity to see these things coming to fruition in light of the fact that now there's a tremendous call for a two-state solution and making this a reality in the near future, we hope. That's one aspect, which is these settlers will become permanent residents, and we offer by reciprocity an equal number of Palestinians to opt to take permanent residency in the State of Israel.

This category of exchange of permanent residencies would not affect the numbers of the Palestinian refugees who would be returning to the State of Palestine. We also deal with the refugees who will return to the State of Palestine and then the exchange of the permanent residence between the two states.

Jon Alterman: How was your proposal received a year ago when you made it?

Hiba Hussein: A year ago, it was very well received. It was a fresh idea, a creative idea, indeed a facilitator to the two-state solution. When we launched it, which was first in the United States actually, it was launched at the White House, to members of Congress, and then we went to New York to the United Nations and met with Secretary General Guterres. The idea was very welcome. From there we went to Europe and had meetings with various members of the European Union states and then the European Union presidency itself. I think there was eagerness to have new ideas placed on the table to revive the discussion on the two-state solution, and to provide avenues whereby the two sides can reengage in constructive negotiations and discussions.

Jon Alterman: What's happened to that kind of work since October 7?

Hiba Hussein: Since October 7, we continue to have discussions, but of course the focus today is on the post-war days in Gaza and how the situation will be dealt

with in terms of the humanitarian crisis, and then the security apparatus that would be established in Gaza and the parties who will be involved in the entire reconstruction of Gaza.

Nevertheless, we've had several discussions, not at an official level yet, although with policymakers and the diplomatic community, on how we can tailor the confederation idea into meeting the needs that have arisen since October 7. We are working on that right now. We're working on the security arrangements for Gaza within and without Gaza, in terms of the internal security, and then the borders with the State of Israel. We are exploring ideas, and we're exploring ideas for Jerusalem as well, and developing Jerusalem's chapter.

Jon Alterman: We've seen a shift in Israeli attitudes, and we've seen a shift in Palestinian attitudes since October 7. Have you seen any shift in attitudes among people involved in this work? Has anybody dropped out or has anybody come on board?

Hiba Hussein: On the contrary, nobody has dropped out. We receive a lot of interest to explain the parameters of it because as people are thinking beyond the day after Gaza, they're also thinking about the shape of the two-state solution and what options might be on the table to discuss the viable solution and the viable end of conflict.

We've received quite a bit of interest from the diplomatic community, policymakers, and think tanks. We're talking about ministries of foreign affairs in various European countries where governments are listening, asking questions, and we are currently engaged in developing our work further.

Jon Alterman: There was a *Financial Times* article last week that talked about how Israelis who were willing to recognize Palestinian suffering in Gaza were being shunned by Israelis. Is the same thing true on the Palestinian side? Is there a sense that there's a war and people who are working with Israelis are giving aid and comfort to the enemy?

Hiba Hussein: Not to the same extent. The Palestinian society has various layers to it, and we have an extreme right and those who are not willing to normalize and have not been willing to normalize for some time. Of course, they are not interested in a discussion. But you see more and more polls showing that the Palestinians are moving more and more towards discussion of the two-state

solution rather than a one-state solution, which was for a while advocated among Palestinians.

“Let’s have a one state solution based on equal rights and so forth and so on.” Now you see a more realistic approach to the two-state solution. People are talking about separation. They want to separate.

Jon Alterman: Although I was just looking at Khalil Shikaki’s most recent poll, which said that the number of West Bank Arabs supporting armed struggle was just over 50 percent before October 7. Similar number now. 70 percent of Palestinians polled believed the decision to launch the October 7 attacks was correct. 93 percent of Palestinians polled said Hamas didn’t commit atrocities that were shown in videos. As you know, Israeli numbers have turned steeply against a two-state solution, as 63 percent of Israeli Jews oppose an independent demilitarized Palestinian state. How do you bridge that gap? It feels like the gap is quite large, quite durable and if anything, has grown larger in the last six months.

Hiba Hussein: Indeed, there is a gap. Many Palestinians, especially among the youth, which is alarming, believe that armed struggle and armed resistance is the only way to get out from under the horrible conditions of the occupation under which they live. They’re basing their reactions in these types of polls on what is also happening in the West Bank because of the continuous, daily Israeli incursions and the restrictions on movement post-October 7.

Just yesterday there was a statistic coming out that around 8,000 Palestinians have been detained since October 7 from the various Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank. The youth are the main target for all of this, and that’s why I think they believe that armed struggle is a language that Israel understands. But at the same time, if we look beyond that, what kind of solution do we want? They want a two-state solution. They want to separate because they don’t want to remain under occupation.

Jon Alterman: Can you help me understand what the Palestinian Peace camp looks like. The Israeli Peace camp is certainly aging. It is from a segment of Israeli society, overwhelmingly Ashkenazi. There are class elements to it. It feels like this is a shrinking part of Israeli society, and the war and the attacks that provoked the war are shrinking it still further. Is the Palestinian peace camp composed of people in their fifties and sixties who had a period of greater integration with Israel, saw greater possibilities in the 1970s and 1980s and think that that can be resurrected? Or does it have other elements to it?

Hiba Hussein: No, there are similarities between the Israeli peace camp and the Palestinian peace camp. Your observation is correct in terms of the fact that both peace camps are shrinking as the societies have become more and more polarized and react to each other. What we see on the ground is action and reaction. The more the Israeli right becomes stronger and stronger, the more the Palestinian right becomes stronger and stronger, and that, unfortunately, affects the youth more and more. Their experience on the ground has been, on the Palestinian side, one of incursions and restrictions on movement and a lack of economic opportunity. On the Israeli side, they see Hamas engaging in rocket attacks every other year or so. The situation is very dangerous.

For both societies, the youth live in fear, insecurity, and distrust of each other, and they have not seen a different model. They have not seen the prospects that the end of conflict and peace would bring about. They moved farther and farther away from each other, and there is no integration, no interaction.

Jon Alterman: 15 years ago, I remember one of the U.S. peace negotiators told me I really had to meet the young Fatah leadership, and that there was a sense of real hope on the Palestinian side. There were these ambitious young leaders who were going to move things in a more positive direction. I said I hadn't met such people, I hadn't heard of such people. I wasn't sure that they were the coming wave the way he described them to be. I'm still not sure who he was talking about. Is there a young political leadership that's a political leadership, or is it, as you also suggest, a military leadership that is whipping people up behind the idea of armed resistance?

Hiba Hussein: I think there is a strong political leadership among Palestinians and less so of a military leadership. Fatah has clearly shaped its young members towards no militarization and towards civil disobedience at best, as opposed to military opposition and militant activities as a form of resistance. There's a division, of course, between Fatah and Hamas on this matter.

However, I think youth believe that Israel understands the language of armed resistance. But they're not necessarily engaging in armed resistance themselves. That's something to distinguish and to understand, in that the youth can be directed and geared towards more political relationships with Israel than a militia-based relationship with Israel.

When President Abbas called for elections in 2021, 36 parties listed themselves to run for election. It was the big parties, Fatah and Hamas, and then 34 smaller lists were eager to run for election. Many of them involved a

lot of young Palestinians who wanted elections, who wanted to renew, refresh, and get new governance among themselves in the society, and to move away from the stalemate in which we have been living.

Jon Alterman: Can I have you reflect on the idea of Palestinian political leadership? Yasser Arafat, in many ways, personified the Palestinian national ambitions for decades but was a flawed individual. There was a lot of hope that Mahmoud Abbas would come in and be able to lead toward a better situation for Palestinians. I think the conclusion of most Palestinians is that things are much worse under Mahmoud Abbas. What constitutes leadership? What would a leader look like and be able to do, given the disaffection, the disappointment, and often the hostility that many Palestinians and especially young Palestinians feel?

Hiba Hussein: Yes, indeed, Palestinian youth, and even the middle-aged are very disappointed in the leadership that we have, be it in Ramallah or in Gaza. It's not just the youth who are disenchanted with Fatah and Hamas. They want to live in prosperous economic conditions and with a government that delivers services, a government that provides a chance for everyone to engage in political life and express themselves freely and openly.

In other words, they want a democratic government, one that provides national unity and one that is able to provide Gaza and West Bank with a united front. Most people do not want to see the division. They did not want to see the fact that the two large parties were disagreeing so much on the basic fundamentals of governance. The people in Gaza were also living in very difficult conditions with Hamas control.

All of this has lent the opportunity to the Israeli government to move away from the two-state solution and provided an opportunity for Israel to say there is no Palestinian partner. The blame and the disappointment stems from this fact that our disunity, lack of proper governance, the authoritarianism with which both the Ramallah and Gaza governments were handling their jurisdictions, all provided a ripe opportunity for Israel to disengage, turn a blind eye and say, "Okay, we don't want to negotiate with the Palestinians. We are happy with where we are and happy with the continued state of conflict management that the Netanyahu government has espoused for the last 13, 14 years."

And the Palestinians see themselves as caught up in all of this, which is not providing hope and opportunity, but rather creating a situation of despair and lack of opportunity.

Jon Alterman: How do we get there? How do we move to a different Palestinian political reality? Especially since we're going to be dealing with the post October 7 reality for many years to come, in terms of political leadership, in terms of reconstruction, in terms of the trauma that Israelis and Palestinians alike have been suffering for the last six months.

Hiba Hussein: Indeed.

I think we need very strong leadership, Palestinian leadership, and I'm afraid we cannot do it alone. We need international support, and we need international help because the Palestinian leadership and the Israeli leadership are not in a position to engage right now. If we want to have a realistic opportunity to move forward and provide some stability and the security that both yearn for, we need the support of the international community and especially the United States.

We need to start with a permanent ceasefire so we can improve the humanitarian conditions in Gaza and deal with the humanitarian crisis there. We need the role of third parties in terms of decommissioning the weapons, handling the governance, handling the health conditions, the food conditions, the basic life conditions for third parties also to feel safe providing this service. The threat of continued war will not allow us to move to day two and day three.

Jon Alterman: What can third parties do to encourage the formation, the emergence of a more effective Palestinian political leadership?

Hiba Hussein: We know that President Abbas, who recently appointed a new government under the premiership of Dr. Mohammad Mustafa, has a team of ministers pretty much all new to the establishment of government and leadership. We need to empower them to facilitate their work, so that they can be more and more legitimate, so that they can go with the support of international organizations, third-party governments, Arab countries, everybody who has expressed goodwill to come into Gaza and assist the Palestinian Authority to manage and govern Gaza, establish rule of law, and slowly rehabilitate and undertake the reconstruction with international organizations. But I have to be honest and here frank and say, Israel cannot spoil this.

We all have a responsibility so that we don't spoil this again and again and undermine the effort because, if we don't get the Israeli government to

accept that they cannot stay in Gaza and allow the Palestinian authority to come into Gaza, then what do we have?

Jon Alterman: But your sense is this is with and through Fatah, rather than moving Fatah aside and working with this large number of non-Fatah groups that you talked about.

Hiba Hussein: We need transitions. We need the transition periods for sure, and we need to have elections. Right now, we can't hold elections. Until we hold elections, we cannot expect new leadership to emerge. We have to deal with what we have today on the ground.

Jon Alterman: As a final question, what does getting back to peace talks look like? What's the pathway? You've been involved in a lot of negotiations over a long period of time. What's the first step to move people along, and what's the first step to reassure Israelis and Palestinians that things will be better, rather than worse, as a consequence of negotiating?

Hiba Hussein: We have to convince the Israeli public and the Palestinian public that peace is the answer. We have to have a genuine, serious effort by the international community, especially by the United States, because the Israeli right is very powerful today, and the Palestinian side is very weak today and disunited. For any legitimate leadership on either side to emerge to engage in the negotiations, we cannot have extremism, because extremism will not negotiate. Both extreme positions are so polarized that they will not even sit down and acknowledge each other, let alone negotiate a peace agreement.

We really need to change the situation on the ground and demonstrate to the public that extremism does not provide peace and security. Once we stabilize Gaza and once the Palestinian Authority has the support of the international community, law and order is established. Slowly, I think the public opinion in Israel and in Palestine will start shifting, and there will be more and more acceptance. But it's going to take some hard work and very serious challenges, and it's not going to be an easy task.

We seem to be shouldering a great deal on the international community, but I'm afraid the international community has abandoned us for such a long time. It's time for them to come back and shepherd this process again because without them, we are not going to be able to do it alone.

Jon Alterman: Hiba Hussein, thank you very much for joining us on Babel.

Hiba Hussein: Thank you very much for having me.

(END.)