

Fast forward to the past

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"I direct my speech ... to the people of Israel, to say, 'How can you?' How can you celebrate [the 60th anniversary of Israel when] the Palestinian people are suffering from your settlements and the crimes of your settlers and the siege of your state and the conduct of your occupying army?" The speaker is no member of Hamas. He is Salam Fayyad, the Palestinian prime minister, the linchpin of Israel's negotiations with the Palestinian Authority and for this reason regarded by Hamas as a Palestinian Uncle Tom. The angry words of the former World Bank economist and current Washington pet are a measure of the frustration felt even by Palestinians who recognise Israel's existence.

It is only too easy to groan in disbelief as George Bush tours the Middle East for his last time as president, treading around the minefield of his past policy disasters. In Israel, the peace process he launched last year at Annapolis is all but dead. In Lebanon, the government on which his administration pinned its hopes has just caved in to Hizbullah, by revoking the two decisions - the removal of the head of airport security and the declaration that the movement's private communications network was illegal - that led to a week of fighting and brought the country to the brink of civil war. The two most implacable opponents of a two-state solution, Hizbullah and Hamas, are stronger than ever before, while their sponsor Iran crows in delight off stage. Hamas's popularity has increased as a result of the siege of 1.4 million Gazans. Nor is Mr Bush's ally Tony Blair exempt from the responsibility. On Tuesday he announced what he considered an achievement: the Israeli army's decision "in principle" to dismantle or relocate four military checkpoints, which he thought would bolster his plans to regenerate jobs in the West Bank. That is four out of a total of more than 600 roadblocks and gates that paralyse movement in the West Bank. If this is success, what is failure?

But nor is despondency a policy. Those who pronounce the premature death of the peace process started in Madrid in 1991 and Oslo in 1993 should consider the alternatives: a one-state solution characterised, in the words of Nathan Brown of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, not by coexistence but by naked domination and brutal resistance; another war, which is where the logic of rejecting ceasefire offers from Hamas is taking Israel; or simply a continuation of the status quo, which allows one state to expand at the expense of another which has yet to be formed.

There exist, even now, concrete alternatives. For the Palestinians, there must be unity talks between Fatah and Hamas. Saudi Arabia is ready to restart the Mecca process. The idea that a workable deal can be achieved with one half of the Palestinian people and then imposed on the other is fatally flawed. The risk of failure is enormous, and an already weakened Fatah will pay a heavy price for it. Hamas, for its part, has to declare and implement a ceasefire. There is growing support across Europe for the idea that the boycott of Gaza and Hamas has to be lifted. A

ceasefire would make it difficult for those who resist the idea that Hamas has to be brought in some way into the political process. It would also be a way of bringing Syria and Iran into the fold.

Engagement does not mean surrendering to Hamas's vision. Nor does it mean rewarding force with talks. The current impasse is leading nowhere except to another - bigger - war. As things stand, the language a US president uses to describe Israel at 60 is indistinguishable from Israel's. Even the symbols are the same. Yesterday Mr Bush sat on top of Masada, the fortress overlooking the Dead Sea, where 1,000 Jews besieged by the Romans allegedly committed mass suicide, a taboo of Judaism, rather than be captured alive. Masada, Mr Bush said, will never fall again. That is not going back 60 years, but over two millenium.