

No going back ? A retrospective

A compilation of the various blogs I've written on this hardest of questions. As I headed this section up in 2009, I lived and worked in israel and have so many friends, relatives and wonderful experiences that I keep adding to. Yet how does that sit with the wilful strangling of palestinian life that builds up so much hatred, that kills, that maims and that sucks away any possibility of hope for a better life, which is surely the only thing that can ever bring peace. We seem far, far further away from it now that we were even then.

18 april 2015, bibi there, done that

As the initial month's mandate approaches, we wait with trepidation for a new israeli government to be formed. We know already the prime minister will be the same man that played such a vile role in creating the atmosphere in which yitzchaq rabin, the last best chance for israeli-palestinian peace, was murdered in 1995 (see **...and that's how it ended**). He held firm against the territorial compromise that peace required then, and he's held firm since, making something that was incredibly hard a generation ago virtually impossible now. This **excellent diagram** charts how israel has moved steadily from being a centre-left polity in the 1950s to a harder right one today. Bibi was on the far right of his party twenty years ago; today, he is its moderate anchor. It is hard not to see that somewhere in this period the final opportunity for a two-state solution passed, as the palestinians' grip on their ever-diminishing territory got ever less and israel's vested interest in keeping what they had ever greater. "We have no partner" became a self-fulfilling prophecy, as now there probably isn't. The respite in **gaza** came in september, yet there was no making hay while the sun shined. No plan, no progress; just more of israel and egypt's joint blockade: bankruptcy, bombast, blankets; broken, even as hamas surrendered control to the pa. Negotiations on re-opening the border have stopped entirely. Meanwhile the decades-long partnership with the pa that has more-or-less kept peace in the west bank has frayed to the thinnest thread, as bereft of even the pretence of a peace process **palestine joined** the international criminal court (which it has every right to do) and israel **withholds the taxes** it owes the pa and which maintain the whole edifice, pushing it towards bankruptcy and anarchy and leading it to withdraw security co-operation. Netanyahu maintains the possibility of a national unity government as a stick to beat his rightist coalition partners into submission with, but it's not hard to be assured that what will emerge will, again, be the most rightwing government israel has ever had. Alas, it will likely also be one of its most stable, and in september 2018 netanyahu would tellingly surpass david ben gurion to become israel's longest-serving pm. What an epitaph to what was once such an astounding civilisational beacon.

9 december 2014, peaceful parastine further away than ever

Palestinian liberation had two basic phases: violence, characterised by gross massacres such as the **avivim school bus bombing** and **munich** and negotiated settlement, of which **oslo** was the apex. As that froze and fizzled, the palestinians zig-zagged between the two tactics; the hamas gaza break-away kept violence in continuous competition for leadership with the mainstream's ever dwindling returns from diplomacy. A big chip was palestinian statehood. Yasser arafat stayed his hand for promises never delivered (see 16 april 2011, **signing palestine's birth certificate**), but more recently his successor, mahmoud abbas, made remarkably transparent, sustained and consensual progress (see 1 december 2012, **yet another small step to parastine**). When decade-long talks collapsed this spring (see 4 april 2014, **timecheck: quarter to trouble**), a key contributor to the barbarity of this summer's gaza conflict, the push for statehood was renewed. The pressure not to undermine negotiations long kept pro-independence sympathies bottled up. Now they seem set to explode, the push coming strongly from europe. The now-fallen **swedish government** went first, followed by the

veritable **british parliament**, the **irish, spanish, danish, belgian** and **european parliament** itself. The rationale is sound: supposed supporters of a two state solution must support israel being a state, and **support palestine becoming another**. It needs to come into being the same way the state of israel itself did, or more recently kosovo. Time, the settlers' rise and the israeli-only infrastructure and security that surrounds them have viciously and remorselessly cut away at a realistic prospect of a palestinian state alongside an israeli one, forcing both sides to seek alternatives. The proposed **jewish state law** that broke the israeli coalition was exactly part of that emerging rightist stream of thought: **listen to naftali bennet**, its leader. With the most right-wing government in israel's history now in (caretaker) power until next march, these are perilous, perilous times, with all signs, on all sides, pointing in the wrong direction.

25 august 2014, lengthening shadow

With october getting closer, and the situation in israel refusing to stabilise - let alone start much more importantly on the path towards an actual **resolution** - the shadow that has been cast over these last months has only darkened. Like a rabbit in the headlights we have let a lot of things slip, so we now need to firm ourselves and push on, even as we feel that is really not how it should be. Deaths in the syrian conflict are now approaching **200, 000** and so while the 2, 000 of gaza may seem small in relation to so many conflicts of both the past and present, they are so much closer to home and it is so **hard** for us to travel there in this renewed light, also taking stock of the country israel **risks** becoming, which is not a good thing to contemplate right now. My work is also approaching a crunchpoint at exactly the same time, there are some issues of old age unfolding before me, and generally things that need to be dealt with, of both the minor and major sort, all seeming to be coming to a head in unison, so it is a very busy moment in life. My desk is crowded, with many incomplete matters, but today we have dedicated to an exclusive focus on october...

10 august 2014, to return

My world of **hungary** this year was rather overwhelmed by my world of **israel**. We generally go to the **balaton** in the summer, and this year was no exception, although it was shorter than usual, due to our longer trip to israel in october. Most unusually the rain fell and the sun refused to shine, which is very disruptive to an outdoor holiday, but the longer shadow was cast by the missiles that continued to rain down on gaza throughout our stay, although a **72-hour ceasefire** did puncture the week with hope, as has **today's**, as things finally seem to be "winding down". On my return, I rapidly tried to get back up to speed, reading **the economist** and listening to the (16 july) **moral maze** I am myself rather lost in, though in my wandering I found **roger cohen** and **yachad**, where at least there are some fellow travellers. Back in manchester, the weather is even worse and I'm back at work tomorrow, and home alone a week as my other half and the boys stayed on. Today I tidied, house and mind, and a late afternoon coffee should keep me at it for a few hours yet, if the endless repeats of friends don't draw me in too much...

12 july 2014, so many wrongs

I mentally moved away from **the conflict** many years ago in utter despair at how, from a moment in time where there were leaders and a process (rabin, araft and oslo, see **...and that's how it ended**) which might, just might, deliver a settlement that a generation later would be peace, there has been a steady and remorseless moving of the fundamentals away from that hope towards a place where no-one can even envisage a solution let alone take responsibility for moving towards it. This makes the last and next years an exercise of management. That has dire consequences every minute of every day, mainly for the palestinians, but occasionally that management breaks down altogether and as my old friend **dan levy** relates, things are more at sea without a paddle now than ever. Whether or not

there is a land incursion **into gaza** (and we can only hope that, like **last time**, the build-up is just pressure to ensure a robust ceasefire), there will of course, like last time, be a stop, a ceasefire (that will closely resemble the **november 2012 agreement**) and silence will reign for some months or years more. The only question is how many palestinians and israelis will be killed before that happens. That this is the very best we can hope for flags, indeed screams, how rotten the status quo is and how, when the heat of battle is reduced, much, much more effort is needed to craft a change. The responsibility for this lies squarely on israel's shoulders. As the sovereign state, as the goliath to the palestinians' david, as the holder of virtually all the cards, the onus is on israel to change the fundamentals. The first step is acceptance that hamas, for all its loathing and violence, is a representative of the palestinians, and the recent attempt (which israel has now probably destroyed) to bring the palestinian factions together under a moderate unity government so they can talk to israel is a good thing to be supported, if the end sought is actually talks. Yes, their charter does not recognise israel, but then netanyahu's ruling likud party charter doesn't recognise palestine either. Yes, this means fatah talking to hamas terrorists, but so did israel when arranging the last ceasefire etc etc. Peace comes from talking not to friends but enemies, even violent enemies seeking to destroy you. They will only be doing the same in 30 years time unless we change something instead of heaping tragedy on tragedy after short pauses. The responsibility for that, the only ones with the ability to do it, is israel.

17 may 2014, narendra begin

I spent most of my final undergraduate year studying india's crucial period of 1919-31, enjoying almost alone the splendours of the **indian institute** reading room, which I have just now googled to find **closed** some years ago. Despite that gifting me a lifelong interest and appreciation of all things india, I have not yet managed to visit, my mid-twenties six-months-in-israel, six-months-in-india plan getting waylaid some years on its first leg. There are many political parallels between the two, not least the dominance of the centre left independence party for decades (anc anyone ?), which after a false start in the 1990s looks finally to have come to an end in india with the **triumphant victory** of **narendra modi** and the bjp after history's largest ever democratic vote. It reminds me of nothing so much as menachem begin similarly recasting israeli politics in 1977, with his likud victory over the previously dominant labour. Like modi, **begin** had a deeply chequered past, having been an outright terrorist in the war for independence, masterminding the bombing of british headquarters in jerusalem, and the hanging of 2 british sergeants. Yet, he went on to head the opposition centre-right in israel, becoming prime minister, and it was he that signed the country's first peace deal in 1978 with what was its arch enemy, egypt. All subsequent peace talks originate from that epoch-making **camp david** source, an "only the right can take on rightist opposition to peace" template that was later echoed in ariel **sharon's evacuation** of the gaza strip. The indian parallel is of course pakistan, which like israel and palestine, were ethnically-separated twins born violently from the same country in the same year of 1947, and which have fought a **series of wars** since. Whilst the conflict has for some time been cold not warm, and various initiatives have not failed, there is not yet a proper peace between these two nuclear-armed neighbours, across probably the most volatile border in the world. Modi's basic election promise was economic development, which he must know requires a significantly warmer relationship with india's dangerous neighbour. From india's side at least, he may just be the man capable of delivering it, which would certainly outshine all else as the history of his tenure starts to be written.

13 july 2013, ever ending ?

The **background noise** is growing that the western powers are finally moving towards declassifying hamas as untouchable and making them part of the peace process. Indeed, what has been apparent for some time, not least in john kerry's invisible **shuttling** attempts, is that you can't have a **two-state solution**, indeed any peace process, without them. Europe, oddly, was always the swing voter that will make this happen, but until now has badly misjudged the call (you can read this thesis in full in **how we made the fatal mistake of not talking to**

hamas), for fear of rocking the boat on more important things with the us, which israel succeeded in convincing the last american president was the price it needed to pay for that. The eu has always **split** on the conflict, and has very **little influence** over israel, although it has always **strongly backed** the (oslo-founded, plo/fatah-based) palestinian authority. Increasingly though, several member states are coming round to having more skin in the game by being the obama vanguard in ensuring that the ongoing big pragmatist-radical battle within hamas is won by the former. Ultimately that is the first stage of a sequence that needs to take place before anything can be achieved: hamas evidence a willingness to talk; the west recognises their right to be part of the process; america cajoles israel to do the same; the two palestinian factions unite; and israel and palestine (it's **now a country**) are put in a room under heavy international auspices until a process and a plan come out (we got there with oslo). Finally there then needs to be years of intense ongoing engagement to actually follow through until we have something like sustainable peace. If you will it, it is no dream.

16 march 2013, and so it came to pass

It's nice to be right sometimes, and that seems the case (see **23 january 2013**) as bibi finally **forms a coalition** with the two new forces in israeli politics and, more importantly, without the ultra orthodox parties. The two have boxed clever, and together, to make sure the coming revolution against the deeply-entrenched settlement the haredi have won for themselves over decades is finally reversed. OK, **tzipi first** was a nice touch, but won't change the fact that she is a don quixote fig leaf who will duly do her job for the next few years, tilting at the windmill of peace to keep the rest of the world just about off israel's back while the government's real business, of fighting back the ultra-orthodox, takes place; and a big battle it will really be. However, with the main opposition labour as much in the camp on this as the government, the chances of success, amazingly, are high. Less so for the peace process, and once again my old comrade-in-arms jonny freedland - sigh - has beat me to it and written the **article** I wanted to write, with the excellent (if unpithy) headline "you're not a tourist, obama. Go to israel with a message". 46 years of occupation has corroded the soul of the nation he concludes, drawing not on the left, but from the hardest of israel's hard men, the former heads of the security service (**the gatekeepers**). He also highlights another oscar nominee, **5 broken cameras**. Like me, most people I know are strong supporters of the "two state solution", an option that on our watch is tragically slipping away. One of those two states is palestine, and there will never be a secure, jewish and democratic state of israel without a state of palestine. If that sticks in the throat, spent a little time to consider the alternatives.

23 january 2013, indelible

The opposite of risk-averse is putting on paper (or whatever this is) thoughts about the likely outcome of israeli coalition negotiations; but here we go. Whatever the instant consensus, this was not a defeat for netanyahu. Hardly a resounding victory, but at the end of the day he's still going to be prime minister and the most dominant figure in the country's history since ben gurion. **Habayit hayehudi** might not have won the "biggest surprise" award, but 12 seats was astounding, and allied to the likud it gives them a 42 seat starting point, making it the bedrock of the coalition. And stand together with his mentor bibi's former chief of staff surely will, no doubt merging with the likud just before the next election, a now tried and tested formula. The big decision then is whether they go with the traditional ultra orthodox (shas and utj bringing in 18 seats) or with the winner of aforementioned award tomi - sorry yair - **lapid**. This is a no brainer, both because secularism, the economy and the haredi-in-the-army issue has defined this election (much more so than the peace process), and because of arithmetic: lapid's 19 seats bring a majority, and will snag others to join too. The power then, as well as the zeitgeist, is all with lapid, but there is little doubt they will seal the deal and we can genuinely expect, for the first time, a shift in the balance on a fundamental israeli axis. Not alas from hawk to dove, but from religious to secular, which is big beans to most (secular, jewish) israelis, and who knows how one shift in the infinitely-fortified status quo may in time lead to another.

22 january 2013, no longer

There was a time when I would stay up all night for the results of israeli elections. They were so much more exciting than in britain. It wasn't just a matter of whether prices would go up a bit or some mines would close; it was war or peace, nirvana or total destruction. I even named my never-finished novel after the 1996 election: went to bed in a dream, woke in a nightmare (read a bit in **...and here's how it ended**). Then, I was heavily invested, partying all night on the news that shimon peres had won: the forces of good and reason, a sane world, the closing of the circle of peace, not just with the palestinians, but with the jordanians, the saudis, the syrians, the moon ! Then, in the morning, we **discovered** that actually netanyahu had won, the epilogue to the assassination of rabin incited nine months earlier, the twisting of the knife that finally killed the years of what could have been. So went the hopes of a generation, **the left** never really getting over losing first that election and then the bitterness of the **second intifada**. We failed (**29 september 2009**) - and here we are, a generation later, still voting for bibi, and in bigger numbers than ever. I'm not staying up tonight - oh well, not too late anyway, there's always hope...

1 december 2012, (yet) another (small) step to parastine

It is more than a year and a half (**16 april 2011**) since we almost had the culmination of **years of international consensus-building** and the legal declaration, **kosovo-style**, of a nascent palestinian state. Browbeaten yet again, the west-bank-based palestinian authority pressed the pause button, to try and find a different way to restart serious negotiations as an alternative route to statehood. Yesterday, they finally followed through, with the un general assembly in new york enthusiastically welcoming **the state of parastine** into their ranks as a non-member observer state. Just nine countries of 193 voted against: the us, canada, panama and the czech republic being the only ones with a population of more than the london borough of camden. Netanyahu responded in typically ebullient style, with the highly-incendiary announcement of a slug of **new settlements** in the west bank and east jerusalem which couldn't be better designed to ignite violence that in the ensuing fog can be blamed on the palestinian's diplomatic move. Though, lest we forget, **netanyahu** is not out on a limb but rather the second longest-serving prime minister in israel's history. It is very difficult to rationalise the stated desire of the israeli body politic for a two state solution (one state of which is palestine) with its absolute hysteria when a palestinian flag is unfurled at the un. You need to make peace not with your friends but with your enemies, and the sad, sad fact is that frustrating and refusing to engage with the moderates of the palestinians simply strengthens the extremists and makes the hamas claim of victory in gaza through force of arms that much more credible. In this case saying there is no partner for peace is a self-fulfilling prophecy, and it is so hard not to see that as the desired outcome in jerusalem rather than two states. The message to that massive and passive israel is be careful what you wish for.

24 november 2012, did we miss something ?

Whilst being enormously relieved about the gaza ceasefire, and optimistic it will hold, I also think something happened we don't yet know about. For hamas it was a clear victory. Reaching tel aviv and flaunting much-improved rocketry buoyed their reputation and won concessions easing the blockade; surely the first step to israel actually **negotiating** with hamas. For abbas and the palestinian authority, equally clear defeat, as they show themselves and their engage-israel strategy impotent. But what about israel ? Though the **usual suspects** rush to fill the pro-israel mass media vacuum, there was a distinct lack of israel's own usual bravado. Rarely have I heard **israeli spokespeople**, least of all in the netanyahu era, sound so uncertain. And this with an israeli election just weeks away. In a first precedent-setting round in the brave new world of a muslim brotherhood-led egypt, how was a hard right israeli prime minister persuaded to accept the status quo ante as an outcome, a clear hamas victory ? Convincing netanyahu of this would surely have taken **the great persuader** himself. And funnily enough, who was actually skipping around when the ceasefire was brokered and agreed - **hilary**. And it is she who surely deserves the real credit for this, as it was she who was the only party in the room

who had anything to offer israel wanted. That is the missing ingredient: a classic rumsfeldian known unknown. We can only speculate what she actually gave, but logic points strongly to the one thing that is a real existential threat to israel. Not gaza, which is ultimately a manageable irritant, but iran, on which israel has been desperately trying to bring the americans round for years. My guess is they finally did, and I'm also guessing we'll know something about it before january 22 2013, as netanyahu has an election to win.

17 november 2012, oh what a lovely war

It didn't take long for the israel-palestine protagonists to test out obama 2.0. One side of the palestinian leadership was first, with "president" abbas making a measured effort to escape the dead-end parastine status quo by unfreezing their bid for recognition at the united nations (see **8 september 2011, 16 and 30 april 2011**). America, not yet ready to move from observer to facilitator, said **no**. This sharpened global divisions (even the europeans are **totally split**) and gave the internal initiative, again, to the rejectionist camp led by a resurgent hamas, now further than ever from a once-imagineable shift to the peace camp (**how we made the fatal mistake of not talking to hamas**). Just as it did after obama's election first time around then, the missile count from gaza into israel started rising, and with an israeli election looming, no prime minister can be seen not to be very strong, least of all netanyahu, and so the irresistible **assassination** of ahmed al-jaabari and off we go, to war, to war. Missile strikes on tel aviv and jerusalem, an absolutely unprecedented expression of new-found capability, heavily underline the internal need for israeli action in this lose-lose scenario. Operation cast lead in 2008 destroyed hamas capability at a cost of some 1,400 lives; pillar of defence will be bigger and better. However, though america may, to the palestinian's disappointment, play the same passive role this time around, things have significantly shifted closer to home, as is already clear from the **visit to gaza** of egypt's prime minister. Egypt may yet be a mediator, but one now that starts in the hamas corner. The debate in israel is whether hamas acted from weakness, either losing its ability to control or needing to reassert its credentials, or from strength. I think the latter. Egypt is a big boon, as is the broader context, from free flowing libyan weaponry to the tense iran tinderbox that could make a vicious little middle eastern war an era-defining global one, not least as a struggling global economy would go into freefall. Israel generally, and netanyahu specifically (**10 march 2012**), are never slow to take advantage of global inaction, and this time the risk of that plunging us all into mayhem is rather higher than it has been for a long, long time. I am not sleeping easily these nights.

22 september 2012, hebron and on

One of the reasons a two-state solution to **israel-palestine** gets further away every day is **hebron**. When peace is finally won, the 1967 "green line" will loosely be the border, with in-roads made by permanent settlements compensated by land elsewhere. Kiryat arba though (7000 jews) lies deep in the west bank, and borders hebron, home of some 250,000 palestinians and around 400 jews. Dozens were massacred there in the 1930s; and dozens of muslims in the 1994 by **baruch goldstein**. Over time a slice of hebron, linking it to kiryat arba, has been carved out and emptied of palestinians. I saw it myself when I went for a walk down that road with a friend shortly after the massacre. The 160 bus from jerusalem had thick bars on the windows (against stones), even as we crossed beautiful countryside for the best part of an hour before reaching the breeze blocks of the entrance to the settlement. At its centre is **meir kahane** park, at the centre of which was goldstein's tomb, resplendent in beige marble with gardens, arches and a cupboard of prayer books. It is one of the most sickening and disgusting sights I have ever seen, the more so as kids on a school trip arrived as we left. I almost cried when the new government of ehud barak finally bulldozed it in 1999. The bus from there to hebron proper is a short one, looking much like any other arab town - until you reach the **machpela**, surrounded by roadblocks and the army. In the courtyard we dived to the ground as two soldiers assumed the position to fire on a group of arabs. There is no jewish quarter as such in hebron, just 3 isolated sites, with the army surrounding them and creating protecting routes between them which they travel in screaming jeeps. There are more soldiers

on the rooftops. Foolishly shielded with our british identities and cameras, we declined the invitation to climb aboard and walked between them, though the streets were pretty deserted apart from smiling kids following us around as we bought chicken in pitta bread. Two jewish kids also passed us, with a heavily armed escort. The third jewish outpost has just one house, surrounded on all sides by sentries, who we chatted to. Quite how nutty the people they are guarding are is just incomprehensible, and decades on, they're still there, barriers to peace. It is my sincere new year wish that without any bloodshed, by 5774 they are gone.

10 may 2012, and again: we have failed

For thirty years I was obsessed with israeli politics, yet I realised how remote it has become when it was quite a shock to read yesterday that **kadima** had joined the coalition. As they originally split from **likud**, it should not really be a surprise, yet just a year or two ago they were the last force closest to the peace camp left standing. Things change though, labour having now bounced back to being the opposition and kadima, having ditched their **once-excellent leader**, now feeling they had little to lose by moving back into a renewed **likud** bloc. With 94 of the knesset's 120 seats, the move completes the **likud** and **netanyahu's** journey from spent force to a domination not seen since the days of **David Ben-Gurion**. As to what this means for the peace process, there's always the **Nixon goes to China** hope that like **Menachem Begin** and **Camp David**, it is the right that may make the breakthrough. But if we've learnt one thing about **netanyahu's** decades on the scene, it is that his entire career has been based on frustrating any efforts towards peace or **palestinian** statehood and with **peaceniks** more powerless than ever there's no reason at all to expect that to change. The reason I am so far away from this now is that when I do get to think about it, this hopeless situation is one of the saddest burdens I carry. As I wrote in one of my first blogs (**21 september 2009**) - we have failed.

25 december 2011, it was sixteen years ago today...

...I was in **Bethlehem**, following through on an impulsive decision to visit the city just a day after the **israeli** army pulled out of what at least to the western world is the most iconic **palestinian** city. The **Oslo Two Agreement**, implemented after **Rabin** was assassinated, saw the army of occupation pull out from the biggest west bank population centres and the establishment of the **palestinian** authority. I was living in **Tel Aviv** at the time (working at its **most excellent museum**) and my colleagues thought the trip totally mad, but actually I had a spellbinding day in an amazing place on literally the first day of the rest of its life. Though hard to imagine now, those were heady times, with even the prime minister's assassination seemingly unable to stop the peace process juggernaut careering towards a two-state solution for one of the world's most contested small spaces. You can read the whole story **here (Christmas in Bethlehem)** but my abiding memories are of smiles, good cheer, crowds everywhere and the smell of freedom in the air. Not victory, but relief, belief and optimism, captured well by the last person I saw that day. Sixteen years later, it's terribly sad to reflect how, far from a new beginning, that period was the briefest of false dawns, as hopes were dashed so soon afterwards and there's never quite been a plan since. If I had one wish for 2012, it would be for peace in that corner of the world, and justice and freedom for all its inhabitants.

8 september 2011, will they or won't they

The days are ticking now towards the **palestinians'** declaration of independence at the **United Nations**, and half the diplomatic world waits to see if they will back down. There is of course the longest history to this (see **signing Palestine's birth certificate**) and it is something of a rerun of 2000, when then-chairman **Yasser Arafat** did indeed **back down**, only to bitterly regret it later. Although **america** would veto an outright membership attempt, opposition seems to retreating for the so-called "vatican" option, which is **palestine** being accepted by the general assembly (as opposed to the security council) as an **Orwellian**-termed "non-member state". This

allows america to have it both ways: not needing to block it, and saying that technically it couldn't anyway. If ready to try his luck, there is a way to turn it into applying pressure on israel to restart negotiations, an issue on obama, whatever the rhetoric, has so far followed the rather spineless bush playbook on. "We have to give them something" seems the general mood both in europe and the world at large, and the palestinians have painstakingly built up to this and would lose huge face by backing down - and so just such a half-way house, which would represent a significant step forward towards palestinian statehood, is not an outlandish scenario. A happy new year for some.

30 april 2011, another step to parastine

Amidst other middle east events for once making the headlines, surprising news on the palestinian front, as fatah and hamas emerge from years of stalemate to take a **tentative but huge stride towards reconciliation**. This is a process rather than an agreement, but it marks a striking turning of the super-tanker in the journey towards the palestinian unity necessary to bring about september's declaration of a palestinian state (see 16 april 2011). The dangers for israel are clear, as depressingly-quickly pointed out by **netanyahu**, already ringing the pavlovian bell of hamas takeover of the west bank and iranian missiles raining down on tel aviv to generate a sense of siege and emergency that the israeli public generally reacts to by backing the government. There is though **another israeli view** to this hasty sourness towards every arab initiative, and tzipi livni again emerges as the sensible voice of the centre in saying that we must wait for any new government's actions, and invoking **the quartet's help**; it would be good indeed if this moribund initiative was somehow resuscitated. However, the key response is from within israel, and the key question there whether over time livni's kadima party can hold out against joining a rejectionist national unity government, and instead thread a way through to support a government that involves hamas tying itself into a fatah consensus to bend over backwards to establish a state in the pre-67 borders only: the basis of the two-state solution the centre has supported in theory for decades. The time for the peace process as cover for business as has become usual is drawing to a close, it's time for the real thing.

16 april 2011, signing palestine's birth certificate

30 years of negotiation between israel, the arabs (palestinians) and america (rest of the world) had two peaks: camp david 1977, successful; and sharm el sheikh 2000, less so. After that, israel turned from moderate to rightist, america from facilitator to observer, and the palestinians to authoritarianism and civil war. Progress became unilateralist, as israel withdrew from lebanon, and then from gaza. Unilateralism replaced land for peace. Both formulae originated on the left, and were then adopted by the right, the wall following the same pattern: it was originally a leftist attempt to nudge forward a palestinian state by drawing borders that no longer existed on a "good fences make good neighbours" basis. In 2000, yasser arafat sought to take a leaf out of the same text book, threatening to just announce a palestinian state, as israel did in 1947; he eventually backed down. Now, not rashly, but after **years of patient international consensus-building**, the palestinians are well set to declare, **kosovo-style**, this september. The jericho-based palestinian authority has a good claim to be capable and ready to function as an independent state. I myself worked a little on solidifying the particular institution of its central bank. This will all come down to very real negotiations at the un, with **europe** likely a strong supporter. The key question is whether obama will, as is usual, exercise an american veto. These are extremely unusual times: the middle east is in chaos; so too is **israel at the un**; us-israel relations are **extremely strained**; the broad brush of "terrorist" no longer sits well with the mainstream palestinian movement; and obama is in **foreign-policy mould-breaking** mood, taking an extraordinary nato back seat in libya. At the last moment of such israel weakness, ariel sharon pushed through the "painful concession" of the gaza withdrawal. What all this means is that the highly reasonable and transparent way the prime-minister salaam fayyad, formerly of the imf, has been going about his business sets the diplomatic price of an american veto unusually high, and so the odds lessen of a scenario where obama takes on the claim that this is bad for israel, and avoids a veto. Watch out for

american positioning and some high profile israel alternative initiatives over the next few weeks. The **first international soccer stadium in the west bank was inaugurated this week**. Bigger things may be kicking off soon.

9 june 2010, beduin

Trekking across the desert from mitzpe ramon, overlooking israel's largest crater, and introducing the family to this outpost of the sahara. Last night we took a jeep out to see scorpions, porcupine, a fox, a hare and a gerbo, which our eldest held in his hand as it was transfixed by our headlights. Today we drove across the crater, saw fascinating rock formations, made tea from herbs, rode camels and spent a few hours at a beduin village. Israel's attitude to beduin is indulgent, as many used to serve in the army, though less today, "we are losing the beduin" our israeli guide told us. A few weeks ago, in an interesting contrast to the flotilla, a group of hundreds broke across the egyptian border, fleeing a blood feud. In the end they stayed months, as negotiation slowly proceeded. Seeing western lives through a satellite and nearby towns saps tradition, as does access to cheap goods and the ban on their nomadic lifestyle, the negev now being virtually all nature reserve or military zone, and the children must go to school. The roof of the tent we had lunch in was once matted goat's hair, but today cheap black tarpaulin. There was no romance in a grindingly poor community without power in daylight and which lives largely off benefits, tourism and smuggling. Kids get on though, and ours couldn't stop playing with the one-day old goats we were given the run of. Tonight, we sleep at an old council block of flats, now a luxury hotel.

7 june 2010, hot, hot, hot

A sweltering 38c today (way over 100f), in the shade, in the evening. Too hot to stay in the pool, certainly for the kids, so stayed in the shade, visiting masada in the afternoon, and bumping into various from the kids' school - it's that sort of holiday. Reading "the master and margharita" a rather heavy russian tome, bequeathed from my last trip here, and enjoying it, with a cocktail or 4, when the kids are in bed, when the hot wind is not blowing the eyelids to sleep. Staying on what was once a kibbutz (ein gedi), and off tomorrow to the heart of the desert to meet camels and beduin and for a nighttime walk. Drinking a litre of water an hour and the most unpretentious but delicious food. And lots of it - the dining room is air-conditioned. High - or low - light was the dead sea. Did the mud-thing at the lowest point ON EARTH, and getting lower, by about a metre a year, as tragically the dead sea slowly disappears before our eyes due to excessive use of the jordan river upstream. They can't build the jettys fast enough.

5 june 2010, bauhaus

Having a lovely time in tel aviv, hanging out by the sea and eating and drinking all manner of good things. Highlight was a guided tour of the world's **bauhaus capital**. The school was german (1919 to 33) but although there are examples the world over, no other city centre is built in the style, as this was just when tel aviv was being built: the population in 1920 was just 2000 people and lots of sand dunes. Bauhaus was deeply egalitarian and utopian, all about building things that are not decorative but purely functional and so cheap to produce for the masses. The square, simple style is evident everywhere here, and the story of its decay, being ignored and then slow restoration and resuscitation is the story of a modern city and people still being built. One favoured solution is to sell off the roof of a typically 3-storey block, with another layer being built and the money used to restore the whole thing. "But that's not preservation !" say the purists. It's wonderful form following function though, and I think those bauhaus pioneers would have approved.

3 june 2010, off on holiday

With immaculate timing, we are off on holiday to israel. We were going to go to the lake district in cumbria, but decided it is just **too dangerous**. Instead we're off to cyprus and then will take a boat towards the holy land. No, actually we're spending several days in tel aviv with my brother (who's there for 6 months), a few days by the dead sea and a couple of days in the middle of the desert, with camels and beduin. I bristle with contradictions on trips to israel, as I have the strongest of views about policies such as the blockade - **see here**. This is not a mad right-wing government, as the old "centrist" administration also followed an exclusionary "treat them like terrorists" policy, as israel did with the plo for several decades. It's mainstream. It's also wrong and self-defeating, creating a self-fulfilling phrophecy. At the end of the day, you need to make peace with your enemies not your allies, and so the sooner israel's own friends and allies convince or force them into that realisation, the sooner we'll be back on a path to peace. No signs of any of that at the moment.

21 september 2009, we failed

At some point in my late teens, I was shocked to learn that there were almost 100,000 settlers living the west bank. Like all like-minded friends, I fought the good fight and argued the case that never mind the poor old palestinians, israel's own survival as a democratic, secular state depended on a negotiated two state solution. Talk with arafat ? Hold your nose: no need to make peace with your friends. A few days ago I read an equally chilling statistic, that very same count - yes, including east Jerusalem - has just topped 500,000. That's not far off the entire jewish population of the state when it was founded. That growth, my friends, that movement from containable, reversible stream to gushing, generational facts-on-the-ground permanence took place on our watch. When the mainsteam left was more in government than out. Not only is there no peace, we're further away from it now than we were then. There's no way to dress that up other than utter failure, yours and mine. Ani ve ata, it seems, did not change the world.