

# Israel wanted to be loved in the West and feared in the Middle East, but now it realises it can't be both

● Twenty years after its withdrawal from Gaza, the prospects of a peace deal seem remote



**Barry O'Halloran**

Friday marked the 20th anniversary of Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza. It may be hard to credit in the present context, but in 2005 there was some optimism about the future of the Middle East.

At the time, the disengagement was seen as a potential turning point in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Some observers believed that Israel's withdrawal would embolden Palestinian moderates to break free from Islamist fundamentalists. Others were more cautious: after all, there had been many previous false dawns.

The withdrawal was carried out by prime minister Ariel Sharon of the right-wing Likud party. This came as a complete surprise to many, including many Israelis, as Sharon was a lifelong supporter of Israeli settlements. Indeed, he was known as the father of the settlement movement.

The Camp David peace talks had collapsed five years earlier. Those negotiations had come tantalisingly close to succeeding.

To this day, Bill Clinton still says he can't believe "what Arafat walked away from... a Palestinian state, with a capital in East Jerusalem, 96pc of the West Bank, 4pc of Israel to make up for the 4pc of the West Bank to be annexed for Israeli settlements" and all of Gaza.

Within two months of the collapse of the talks, Palestinians responded with a mass bombing campaign. This became the Second Intifada in which suicide bombers — including children — blew themselves

up in buses, cafes, bars and restaurants across Israel, killing over 1,000 Israeli civilians.

Then in 2003, US president George W Bush announced his "roadmap for peace". His initiative proposed delivering a Palestinian state on a phased basis. For the first time ever, an Israeli prime minister gave his assent to a Palestinian state. For many, Sharon seemed a most unlikely harbinger of peace.

In 2003, Sharon ran in the Israeli elections on the slogan "I Will Bring Peace" and received 60pc of the popular vote.

This was the largest electoral victory ever recorded in Israel and it ended the Labour Party's dominant role in Israeli politics. The historic moment came in October 2004 as the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, voted for unilateral disengagement. The Gaza withdrawal was completed on August 15, 2005.

**There were two primary arguments for the disengagement.** Keeping a large Palestinian population (then 1.3 million) under Israeli control would undermine Israel's Jewish majority. The cost of securing isolated settlements in Gaza had also become prohibitive.

The withdrawal was met with relief by Israelis and with plaudits for Israel from the international community. Palestinians saw it as a significant victory since they were required to give nothing in return.

It was a win-win for everybody, or so everybody thought.

Then came a rude awakening, courtesy of what may be the most malign influence in the whole Middle East: the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood's Gazan offshoot, Hamas, won the 2006 legislative elections — and then organised a coup against the internationally recognised Palestinian Authority.

Many members of the authority were summarily executed, while others were forced to flee for their lives.

For the next 20 years, Hamas used its

control of Gaza to prosecute its "forever war" against Israel.

Four wars followed, each beginning with Hamas firing volleys of Iranian-made rockets into Israeli civilian areas. These attacks were invariably followed by Israel bombing Gaza. Each of these wars was relatively short and soon led to ceasefires.

It seemed to be a recurring process that culminated on October 7, 2023, when Hamas attacked the Nova music festival attendees and kibbutzim residents of southern Israel. They murdered 1,250 Israelis and took 250 hostages.

The unintended consequences of that invasion would have confounded its chief architect, the now deceased Yahya Sinwar. The security and geopolitical landscape of the Middle East was transformed irrevocably, with Israel as the new regional superpower.

Since the Israeli army re-entered Gaza, the reputational damage to Israel has been incalculable. Many in the West now believe that Israelis don't care about how they are perceived internationally.

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That impression is understandable, but it's wrong. Israel's situation is more complex than it at first appears. Israel in fact have two reputations it needs to protect, and these reputations are in conflict.

In the Middle East, Israel wants to be feared; in the West, it wants to be loved.

For Middle Eastern Islamists who seek its destruction, Israel has adopted Caligula's attitude: "Let them hate, so long as they fear." Although love and fear are opposite ends of the spectrum, long experience has taught Israelis that they have little choice but to opt for fear over love in a region where moderate peacemakers are as scarce as hen's teeth.

Westerners by and large fail to understand this choice, imagining instead that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is simply a question of divvying up land in the right way. If this were the case, the conflict would have been resolved decades ago.

When explaining to the UK parliament in 1947 why the British Mandate in Palestine had failed, foreign minister Ernest Bevin put his finger on the problem. "His Majesty's Government have been faced with an irreconcilable conflict of principles. For the Jews, the essential point of principle is the creation of a sovereign Jewish state. For the Arabs, the essential point of principle is to resist to the last the establishment of Jewish sovereignty in any part of Palestine."

That "irreconcilable conflict of principles" has driven the conflict between Jews and Palestinian Arabs for the last 100 years, and no amount of pious rhetoric about a two-state solution will resolve it. Unless it is resolved, the conflict could easily last for another 100 years.

Recently Bill Clinton said: "I think what's happened there [Gaza] in the last 25 years is one of the great tragedies of the 21st century."

As the IDF gets ready to take over Gaza city, with its population of more than one million people, that tragedy could soon get a great deal worse.