

# Middle East Policy

Volume X

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Number 3

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**Peace Fire: Fragments from the Israel-Palestine Story**, Ethan Casey and Paul Hilder, eds. Free Association Books, 2002. 357 Pages. \$19.95, hardcover.

*Deepa Kandaswamy*

*Free-lance writer, political analyst*

While Bill Clinton, Yasser Arafat and Ehud Barak were holding peace talks at Camp David with the world press waiting with bated breath outside, a completely different scenario was unfolding in Israel and the occupied territories. Did the "peace process" really stand a chance? How did the second intifada (Palestinian uprising) start? How did it change from stone throwing to suicide bombing? Was Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount politically motivated, and if so, how? What is life like for normal people in this abnormal land which is in a perpetual state of war? These questions and more are answered in the remarkable book, *Peace Fire: Fragments from the Israel-Palestine Story*.

From the bulldozing of houses full of people in Jenin by Israeli soldiers to suicide bombings during Passover in Netanya, from the siege of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem to the memorial vigil held by Palestinians for the victims of September 11, *Peace Fire* is a chronicle of over 100 essays by ordinary people that tell the story of how the vicious circle of grief-anger-violence has wreaked havoc for the past two years. The book is a testament to how the hatred of a few holds captive the hopes and lives of many. The essays take the reader through the daily "normal" lives of people where siege, bombs, snipers and the stench of death have become routine since the failure in the summer of 2000 of the summit at Camp David and the beginning of second intifada.

This book has been painstakingly edited by an American and a Brit, neither of whom is Jewish nor Arab. Ethan Casey is the editor of several books and cofounder of BlueEar.com, the online global journalism community. An American editor and journalist, he has reported from Asia and elsewhere for various publications of international renown such as *The Guardian* and *South China Morning Post*. Paul Hilder is an editor, writer and cofounder of opendemocracy.net, the independent global network for debate and invention that focuses mainly on globalization, Europe, network-society issues and the Middle East. A British writer and strategist, he has worked in policy and regional development and as the director of the multimedia theater company, LOCI.

How do you justify a tank gunning down three kids on bikes whose father is a Palestinian bus driver in Israel? Why has the Israeli public of late become indifferent to the killing of Palestinian civilians, especially children? These questions are answered with another simple one by the Israelis: How can you explain away the death of your best friend, who wanted to be a teacher for peace, in a suicide bombing by a Palestinian? Shoot your way out and kill them all. Religion and politics aside, what makes a dedicated nurse turn into a suicide bomber? Palestinian suicide bombers feel the same way. This is a war in which each side is bent on annihilating the other. Amidst this, a chilling new generation of young people on both sides is growing up believing they'll die young anyway and so espouse hate and vengeance.

*Peace Fire* is impossible to read without being moved to tears and anger as the headlines fade and you are forced to live in the reality of the conflict with the people. There's no easy escape here into legal debates and moral high grounds. It is an effort to provide a platform for voices that are seldom heard: Yitzhak Rosenthal, an orthodox Jewish businessman who turned peace activist after his son Arik, an Israeli soldier, was murdered by terrorists in 1994; Monica Tarzai, who almost got killed as she went to donate blood for Palestinians, shot at during a demonstration; "lucky" people in refugee camps who have only lost parts of their bodies to angry teenagers who have lost their best friends in suicide bombings. The book also acts as a meeting point for nonviolent organizations, like Grassroots International for Protection of Palestinians and Netivot Shalom and women on both sides who meet secretly to see if they can find a way out. These people who, despite personal tragedies, believe you can never win by hate and violence and are willing to talk so that their children can have a future.

A major problem is demographics. Both sides believe the Jewish nature of Israel in 25-50 years, with an ever-shrinking Jewish population despite dual citizenship, perks and laws favoring the Jews and discriminating against the ever-increasing Palestinians, will be unsustainable. The only eventual solution to retaining the Jewish nature of Israel, according to some Israelis, including several members of the Sharon administration, is to get rid of the Palestinians altogether from the occupied territories and to check their growth rate inside Israel, with its Arab population of over one million.

Some Palestinians write about why they distrust America. They explain that almost every bullet, shell, missile and tank that kills a Palestinian has a "Made in USA" label on it. How can we trust the Americans, they demand?

In dealing with the Middle East war, this book is unusual, for it doesn't hide behind euphemisms like "conflict," "violence," "fighting," "antisemitism," etc. Even the cover image of the book shows a Palestinian teenager throwing stones at a *Palestinian* policeman. Israelis talk about their dead Palestinian employees, Palestinians about their Israeli friends. Palestinians describe being number-inscribed by Israeli soldiers, as the "European" Jews were under Hitler, a practice condemned by very few Israelis nowadays. A Palestinian writes that they are paying for European sins against the Jews and have become refugees in their own homeland while their elders still insist on keeping 50-year-old keys to houses that don't exist anymore. Unaware of the fact, they are hoping to return one day.

Every killing, house demolition and suicide bombing opens up old wounds. It is untenable for Israelis to live in terror. It is unsustainable for Palestinians to live in occupation, squalor and fear. Maybe an Israeli de Klerk or a Palestinian Mandela is their only hope, but where will he come from, with such anger, politics of victimhood and mob mentality on both sides?

With the Middle East Roadmap having been unveiled, *Peace Fire* is relevant now more than ever. The personal essays and poems go to the heart of the problem and are refreshingly devoid of the political rhetoric that we are used to hearing from the spokespersons of Israel and the PA. The people need to be convinced if the Roadmap is to succeed. It would be a good idea to listen to them. Failure to do so was one of the main reasons the Clinton-led peace talks failed. Apolitical in tone and packed with information and insight, this book is a must read for those interested in the Middle East, from policy makers to those who just want to make sense of what is going on.

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