

If one thing shows how much the Middle East has changed in the last two years it is the silence around the latest crisis in Israeli-Palestinian relations. Once the unifying cause of the Arab world, the tit-for-tat deaths have raised little more than a murmur, and that mostly focussed on the status of the al-Aqsa mosque, rather than Palestinian blood. Instead, the complex psychological crisis has been played out to the gasps of the international media, and a long, cold silence from those around the interlocked territories. The silence is not just due to the rise of Daesh (ISIL), but in part attributable to the fatigue all those looking in must feel. Whatever else is said about both sides, it is clear that neither has been a realistic partner for peace since the self-sabotage of the Camp David accords in the 2000; to refer to the Shakesperian, those looking in must wish a plague on both their houses.

Since the bloody and explosive establishment of Israel, both sides have found themselves locked in a dance of despair and hopelessness, a tight hug of fear and hatred. But this dismal embrace has proven sustaining to the leaders and populations of both territories. And as it has sustained them it has fundamentally changed them. The hopes for peace are long gone – the societies that those hopes must breed in are too far gone, too far brutalised and hopeless. Each is only geared for a perpetual state of war, a state that has become so embedded in the psyche of each population over the last decade that it is difficult to see it outlived. The threats each side perceive around them, and the silence of their partners only strengthens the vital force of this mindset. Neither leader nor population can exist outside of it – it is the illuminating force of both side, a force that keeps both alive and dead at the same time, that keeps both fighting, but with hope extinguished.

It is a force that cannot be diminished. The political dynamic inside both countries has suffered a decisive shift to the right, unleashed by the foolish and weak leaders who believed they could tame a snake of their own making. Both Netanyahu and Abbas have sought legitimacy from their rhetoric of defiance and hatred. In their policy measures, whether in supporting Jewish settlement expansion or appearing at the funerals of Palestinian extremists, each has given in to the extremist tendencies of sections of their own populations. Of course, both leaders have taken brave decisions to confront their extremists inside their own states, and to engage in peace talks, but each has never transcended the need to counter these decisions with sops to those same extremists. The actions of each leader are a mirror image of the other, and their positions have become mutually reinforcing. Both countries are in a cycle of despair that seems impossible to escape, as the population has thrown itself into the cycle as well. The poverty, hopelessness and hatred in the Occupied Territories is equally matched by the securitisation and loathing in Israeli settlements. And while it is, the idea of two states, side by side in peace, is but a dream.

What should be most concerning is that the old warriors of Israel, even Palestine, have died. These men who brought war – Ariel Sharon, Yitzhak Rabin - also knew that they had to, one day, bring peace. And these men who built a state from their own force of will and martial strength were perhaps the only ones with the moral strength and authority to find peace. As Sharon once said to the Knesset "as one who fought in all of Israel's wars, and learned from personal experience that without proper force, we do not have a chance of surviving in this region, which does not show mercy towards the weak, I have also learned from experience that the sword alone cannot decide this bitter dispute in this land". Those who follow them live in their shadows, as Netanyahu does with his brother Yonatan. They are overwhelmed by what has come before them, and think that the only time to defend their legacy is to fight for it. The new Israeli leaders, such as Netanyahu and Naftali Bennett were born in a state of war, and grown to power in a time in which the whole region is aflame. They see no opportunity for peace, but only the need to constantly attack and belittle their Arab enemy in order to preserve their sacred flame.

The same feeling exists in Palestinians, if stemming from different origins. The success of Hamas and Hizballah against Israeli forces, and the deep failures of Arab forces in the Yom Kippur war has taught the inheritors of these factions that they can only win by fighting. And the rise of Salafism and its often deeply violent expressions across the Arab world mean Palestinian factions can only stay alive if they speak a language of aggression and hatred; a virulent anti-semitism flowing through their poisoned words. A man such as Yassir Arafat who may once have made a secular and lasting peace is gone. In his place are only dogmatic fundamentalists.

That the Israeli and Palestinian leaders died before they made peace is testament to the deepness of the wounds they inflicted on each other, and their own stubbornness. But their deaths leave a gaping void. Those who come after them share an understanding that only force, animated by a strong and vital antipathy to the other side can sustain their existence. The opponents of this ideology are weaker than they have ever been, the counter-argument of peace and peacefulness buried in the avalanche of bullets and stones. The rhetoric has shifted so far to the right that even arguments must be framed in the language of security and aggression, if a watered down one.

This shift means the chances of 20 years ago are long gone. All that remains in these biblical lands is a hollow fatigue, and outside of it partners who look in but with little real interest save the religious status of Jerusalem. The war that striates this land seems set for eternity now. While it will be quiet again, and while peace may break out again, until each side finds the desire for peace stronger than for war and is willing to break with their own side to achieve that, nothing will ever change. Hatred has triumphed, to the silent applause of a troubled and turbulent region.

Charlie Pratt is a U K Defence Forum Reseach Associate