ME peace: No shortcuts, just small steps

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Last week, the Tuesday evening news was on. In the middle of the broadcast came the anchorman's all-too-familiar downward glance, a tightening of voice: "We are getting initial reports of an explosion in north Jerusalem ..." The scenes of senseless carnage that soon appeared only confirmed what we had all feared, almost known, from that first downward glance. Within minutes, the familiar mantra mongers were on screen. "If we just take out the terror leaders and retake the refugee camps ..." - "If we just complete this final status agreement ..." - "If we just erect another 100 miles of fence ... this will all be over."

And despite our desire to believe, we hear these multiple choices and we know the answer is none of the above. My wife, our three daughters and I work and go to school within 200 yards of one another in downtown Jerusalem. In our own private Bermuda triangle we've had 10 suicide attacks within the last three years. For the six brief weeks of the cease-fire, we had allowed ourselves pretence of normalcy - previously unthinkable trips to the mall, nights at the movies. But on Tuesday night we were back on the edge of the abyss.

We - and by "we" I mean the large majority of Israelis and Palestinians, bloodied and exhausted - know how this all will end five or 10 years from now. With a Palestinian state more or less along the pre-1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. It's all over but the body count.

But today there seems to be no way of proceeding from here to there, to bridge the chasm between the politically impossible and the historically inevitable.

Mutual exhaustion is not a replacement for leadership - and neither side has leaders capable of articulating, much less implementing, a credible political process. At this stage of the game, it is Politics 2, History 0.

For the past 12 years, I have taken my government at its word: That the Palestinians of East Jerusalem are entitled to due process and equality under law. But how does one go on the day after such an outrage? It is easier than it sounds. By taking it step by step. By getting up the day after the terrorist attack, in my case, for an 8 a.m. meeting with Samih. Samih is a 29-year-old Palestinian who lives in Kfar Aqab, the northernmost neighbourhood in East Jerusalem. Nominally, he is a sausage salesman. But in essence, he embodies the future of Palestinian Jerusalem.

How? I'll give you an example. Virtually no municipal or governmental services reach Kfar Aqab - even if it is part of "the undivided capital of Israel which will never be re-divided." The neighbourhood hasn't had a sewage system for 35 years. (And, oddly, sewage even in Jerusalem obeys the laws of gravity, not the Likud party platform or the PLO covenant.) Complaints and pleas didn't help, and despite repeated promises, nothing was done.

But four months ago, Samih marched into the Jerusalem Municipality offices, grinning ear to ear, and confessed to a crime. He had collected money from his already impoverished neighbours, gotten a sewage line built and had it hooked it up illegally to the city pipelines.

Initially taken aback, municipal officials now hope to replicate this model of self-empowerment in other areas of endeavour.

Another example: Palestinians complained about the graft paid to soldiers at the checkpoints, but I couldn't go to the authorities without evidence. "Bring me a photo," I told Samih. Days later he sauntered in, grinning again. "Will a receipt do?" he asked, proudly brandishing a piece of paper - while I wondered whether his grin was about his own success or the stupidity of the soldier. That's why, hours after last week's terrorist attack, I met with Samih as planned. We are used to working in the shadow of disaster, and we got right down to the next task: How to prevent the perennial flooding of his neighbourhood next winter. Samih and I aren't alone. There are people like Haj Hassan, a retired town planner, who is working with Ayala, an Israeli architect, to try to humanise the blatantly dysfunctional planning regime in East Jerusalem. And Hillel, a retired Hebrew University computer expert, has joined forces with Hussam from Beit Hanina. Pepe the councilman and Fuad who runs the clinic in Beit Safafa to get Palestinian kids into public schools.

Two years ago, a few of us got together in my living room to discuss the school issue. From a nearby neighbourhood, we could hear machine-gun and tank fire. There was an awkward pause, and then one of the Palestinians said: "Our people are firing on your people, and your people on ours. Can we meet like this?" The answer was immediate and unanimous: yes. "We've got work to do."

Are we representative? Of course not! The cumulative fear, humiliation and terror of the past three years have destroyed the hesitant mutual humanisation that began during the Oslo years. Palestinians have no idea how terrorised Israelis are, how disrupted our lives. And we Israelis have no idea how humiliated and subjugated the Palestinians are.

But, marginal as this group might be, we are far more representative of our respective peoples and their aspirations than the suicide bombers and extremists on both sides. Both peoples are better than their current leaderships.

Even Jerusalem is still an eminently viable city. If history has condemned us to share this city, it is a verdict the vast majority on both sides can live with.

There are no shortcuts. There are small steps to take, however, and that is what we do. It is late Thursday afternoon. From my desk, there's a view of the setting sun bathing Jerusalem in a golden-pink glow. As I type, news comes in of the "liquidation" of Hamas leader Ismail Abu Shanab. He will not be missed, but the dozens of Israelis and Palestinians likely to die in the frenzy of retaliation and counter-retaliation will be indeed.

And calls come in from the Palestinian village of Abu Dis, where a new stretch of security fence is going up. A D9 Caterpillar has arrived, heavily secured by the military. Some frantic phone calls to the army and the authorities agree to limit their immediate actions to breaking down a garden wall. We will negotiate the precise route of where the eight-yard-high security fence will be placed.

In the aftermath of Tuesday's bus attack, there is no hope of stopping this folly. For the first time since Suleiman the Magnificent walled in Jerusalem in the 16th century, Jerusalem will be walled once again. So why bother?

Thirty years ago I came here as a Zionist, and a Zionist I remain. Ironically, Zionism's crowning achievement - a secure place among nations - can be achieved only by resolution of the conflict with our Palestinian enemies, just as their achievement - a Palestinian state - can be reached only with us.