

Israeli-Palestinian peace as elusive as ever, Cotler says

By DAVID LAZARUS
Staff Reporter

MONTREAL — Liberal MP Irwin Cotler's recent annual fact-finding trip to the Middle East produced little to be hopeful about, he said at a recent media briefing upon his return.

In fact, contrary to some opinions — including those of former British prime minister Tony Blair, U.S. President Barack Obama, and diplomats at the United Nations — that there's "no end in sight" to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Cotler concluded.

Peace, he said, is as elusive as ever.

During his sojourn in the Middle East, Cotler met with Palestinian Authority (PA) Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki and Fatah Tanzim leader Kadura Phares.

He also witnessed the goings-on at the Fatah assembly in Bethlehem, the first in two decades.

Cotler came away with the view that "profound divisions" remain vis-à-vis the conflict, specifically on five issues: borders, the two-state solution, Palestinian refugees, Jerusalem and settlements.

"So on five major issues, there is no consensus," Cotler said.

Right now, he said, there is no Palestinian leadership that can purport to "speak on behalf of the Palestinian people" because Hamas, which is in control in Gaza, continues to refuse to recognize Israel.

At the Fatah convention in Bethlehem, the evidence of deep divisions among the Palestinians themselves was

there to be seen, Cotler said.

Besides the PA and Hamas fighting to be seen as the leaders of the Palestinian people, he said, the PA is "strongly divided within itself" in the form of a "generational" conflict in which younger Palestinians don't necessarily trust older ones.

"This all played out at the Fatah convention," Cotler said, and was confirmed in his meeting with Phares.

Interestingly, he noted, neither Fayyad nor al-Maliki actually attended the Fatah conference, since they're not members of Fatah.

The decisions at the assembly also underscored the hard line that Palestinian militants are continuing to take on the conflict. They included no recognition of Israel as a Jewish state, a full return to pre-1967 borders, a non-negotiable right of return for Palestinian refugees, dismantling (not only freezing) settlements and, to Cotler's surprise, a call for both east and west Jerusalem to fall under Palestinian sovereignty.

Israel, according to the assembly, Cotler related, was even to blame for former PA president Yasser Arafat's death.

"So not only is peace impossible right now, even a process toward peace is," Cotler said.

Both Fayyad and al-Maliki, he noted, rejected many of the decisions taken at the assembly.

In light of all this, Cotler said Ottawa could play a role by urging reform of the Palestinian justice system and by establishing a "tripartisan" committee comprising Canadians, Israelis and Palestinians to reduce the level of "incitement" toward Israel.

Canada can and should be more "engagé," he said.

In answer to a question by *The CJN*, Cotler said PA President Mahmoud Abbas does not appear prepared to confront Hamas, although he must.

While visiting the West Bank, Cotler noticed that conditions have improved greatly, with security and governance making the lives of the people there much better.

"People are in the cafés.

It is more cosmopolitan," he said, noting that Palestinian elections are due to take place next January and that Fayyad hoped word would get out to Gaza that life there under Fatah could be better than it is now under Hamas.

"I shared his optimism about the West Bank," Cotler said, "but I don't think the people in Gaza know about what's going on there."

Cotler also presented a list of "10 ways to contain Iran," many of which are already in the private member's bill he tabled in June, the Iran Accountability Act, and others that aren't, such as denying landing rights to the Iranian transportation industry and better enforcement of embargoes on technology and arms.



Irwin Cotler



GOLF WINNERS: BBYO's friends and alumni network (FAN) recently held its 15th annual Memorial Golf Tournament at Nobleton Lakes Golf Club. The annual tourney supports BBYO's Lake Ontario region, with a portion of this year's proceeds benefiting Colon Cancer Canada in memory of alumnus Steve Glickman and the Canadian Memorial Chiropractic College in memory of Michael Brickman. Pictured, at right, is Jeff Wagman, event chair, along with members of the winning foursome, from left, Marc Lampert, Marv Harris and Jeff Kirshenbaum. Absent is Josh Medad.

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