

**S**trange things happen to people when they come to the Holy Land. While Air Force One might not have actually touched down on the ancient soil of Israel or what will eventually be the state of Palestine, there must be something in the air.

Jerusalem syndrome is a psychosis that affects a small group of people – often sane tourists, sometimes pilgrims with very deep religious convictions, sometimes just the unbalanced – who end up thinking they are the Virgin Mary, John the Baptist or even Jesus Christ.

Perhaps this explains the American president's pressing messianic desire and quest to bring peace to the Middle East for so long off his agenda.

The doctor who named this syndrome, Jerusalem-based Dr Yair Bar-El, explains: "The same clinical picture always emerges. It begins with general anxiety and nervousness, and then the tourist feels an imperative need to visit the holy places.

"The next step is an actual visit to the holy places, most often from the life of Jesus. The afflicted tourist begins to deliver a sermon, demanding that humanity become calmer, purer, and less materialistic."

The feeling in Israel, from where this column comes, on both sides is a sense not of optimism, been down that road too many times, but one of being cautiously positive.

Too many false starts have abruptly halted. Too many people have died. Too many lives lie in ruins.

Somewhere in the middle both sides are realistic, if only because people are weary and need a solution.

You will always get cynics, lunatics and dark minds. Hard-liners, like former Israeli prime minister Benjamin Ne-

# Side by side – or suicide

## On the AGENDA



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tanyahu, say that fences make good neighbours, referring not only to Robert Frost's poem, but also to the wall that Israel is building along the green line.

The foreign minister sees the battle as an existential not a territorial one.

Then more moderate voices, like my Palestinian taxi-driver, want peace, and for Yasser Arafat to go. This was a common sentiment amongst the Palestinians.

The road map isn't perfect. Each side has a powerful claim over the same small piece of land, and both feel this is the only place they can call their homeland.

Israelis and Palestinians have to

acknowledge that for the process to proceed. The only way to resolve this conflict is for painful concessions and to accept that certain problems will remain unsolvable.

That said, George Bush seems intent on solving this issue, and with any luck he has two partners who have the same purpose. As with all politicians, 76-year old Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is looking to secure his legacy.

Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen) looks to his future with a viable state.

Amos Oz, the left-wing author and Israeli Nobel laureate, has identified the one characteristic that no fanatic seems to possess – a sense of humour. Sarcasm, yes, but humour no.

For the past year Bush has talked about two states living side by side, which evokes memories of the famous American musical *Side By Side By Sondheim*. If peace breaks out – there will be a revival – and it may even be a miracle. If not it could be Armageddon.

Despite everyone's best effort there might not be a settlement because the Islamists have too much invested in perpetuating the war.

That might not be Armageddon. It may be the mainstream on both sides will have to evolve pragmatic day-to-day arrangements that will enable Palestinian self-rule while maximising Israeli security – conflict management rather than resolution.

Regardless of the outcome can you ever stop trying? If you do, what then? While peace is no certainty all other options seem worse.

Bush's arrival in the Middle East this week may not be the second coming but perhaps it is a harbinger of better things to come. Or maybe we just all need our heads examined.