

Amicable divorce is required

*On the*AGENDA



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Never perform with animals or children, goes the old saying. And never write about the Middle East if you want peace. In this conflict, no objectivity exists.

You sit with Palestinians and curse the Israelis.

Then you sit with the Israelis and wonder how they live any type of normal life either.

On the beach front in Tel Aviv I stood between the suicide bomb sites of the Dolphinarium and Mike's Place, at the entrance to a bar, having a discussion about whether a human explosion would have more impact inside the restaurant or outside.

My apprehension about being there at all was overwhelming.

Finally, I went in and had a drink, but the idea that I could be blown up at any minute hung in the salty air.

Later, I felt huge relief sitting in the leafy sanctuary of the American Colony hotel in East Jerusalem, but equally conflicted at the conversations about the difficulty of life for Palestinians, an issue close to the heart of all the Arabs I ever speak to.

However diabolical daily existence is – curfews, roadblocks – explaining the concept of suicide bombing simply as an act of desperation doesn't deal with the complexity of the syndrome. And kids still go to school and university.

Last month a spate of Israeli businessmen killed themselves as their financial situations, and lives, became irretrievable and unbearable.

Why didn't they go and kill Palestinians as an act of vengeance?

Visualising what the other has to contend with seems near impossible. Imagine having to send your child to school by public transport every day and not knowing whether or not he or she will come home

alive. Every time you go into a bar or restaurant you wonder if you will come out alive or unmangled.

It's a terrifying prospect, but one that Israelis have to live with. Last month over 135 suicide bomb attempts were thwarted; three bombers got through.

While they go about their daily lives as normally as possible, that sense of doom and disaster underlies going shopping or to the theatre, which they do, adjusting, as the Palestinians have also had to do, in an untenable situation. People have to get on with things, and inevitably do.

Then spend five hours trying to cross a checkpoint in intense heat, frustrated

and angry, to come to work, if you are lucky enough to have any, as a Palestinian in Jerusalem.

As I write this, the Israelis have just bombed Gaza. Hamas has vowed revenge. George Bush has voiced his concern about Israeli action. All this threatens, yet again, to derail any attempts at peace, so what happens now is a true test of the "road map".

And the real buzzword is leadership. Good guidance by Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon, and Palestinian prime minister Mahmoud Abbas, is what both sides are talking about if any form of co-existence is to persist.

And can it? Some have said the situation is diametrically opposed to what had to happen in South Africa, as wrong a situation as you can get.

In this conflict you are not looking at a marriage as you were in South Africa, but for the exact opposite.

You need a divorce.

The problem, said one commentator, is that in this divorce you wake up every morning in the arms of your ex-wife.

Regardless, 70% of the population on both sides consistently say they want peace; the problem is that the other 30% are vocal and vicious.

Well, France and Germany (and even Britain!) learned to live together after World War Two, so conciliation is possible with the right leadership.

Post-Iraq the music now is also different. America has indicated that it is not going to put up with terror regimes.

Abbas, who has the support of the international community (but could be playing the cloak-and-dagger game for Yasser Arafat) has said he will end terror.

Ariel Sharon (who virtually no one in the Arab world believes) has said he will end the occupation.

It's a relief to be in Jordan. The jury is still out on Iraq, where I am headed next.