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Disdain On Both Sides Of Security Barrier

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Gilo, a Jewish suburb south of Jerusalem, forms one of the countless frontlines in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Perched on a hilltop the quiet residential area was built on occupied land after the 1967 war and now lies just a few hundred metres from the Palestinian village of Beit Jala.

Five years ago, the two communities and the valley that separates them were transformed into a war zone. At the height of the second Palestinian intifada, or uprising, residents of Gilo became the targets of daily sniper fire from Palestinian fighters. On the other side, the people of Beit Jala were subjected to heavy attack from the Israeli army, which moved into the village and occupied several houses.

Today, the two neighbourhoods are separated by the walls and fences that form Israel's security barrier. The Israeli government has installed additional concrete blast walls along some Gilo streets as well as bullet-proof windows in the apartments that directly face Beit Jala.

Yet, in one sense, the residents of the two communities are united: in their disdain for the outcome of the Middle East peace conference at Annapolis. Hailed by some leaders as a historic event designed to usher in the end of six decades of bloody conflict, it has done nothing to dispel the fierce mistrust voiced by residents on both sides of the divide.

"This is just a waste of time. Nothing is going to come out of it," says Yaron Maimon, a Gilo resident. He says he is worried that Ehud Olmert, the Israeli prime minister, will make concessions to the Palestinians, especially over dividing Jerusalem, without receiving peace in return. Mr Maimon is convinced that "there will never be peace with the Palestinians".

Yossi Issak, another resident of Gilo, is also afraid of territorial concessions. “The Palestinians have already got their places in Ramallah and Bethlehem [in the West Bank]. If they want to live in peace, we will live in peace with them. If they want to throw us into the sea, we will throw them into the sea.”

He does not believe that Palestinians want to live in peace with Israel. “There will be no peace,” he says, “not even in a thousand years.”

Across the valley in Beit Jala, Bishara Karoufe, a Palestinian Christian, is hosting a barbecue lunch for friends and relatives in his garden overlooking Gilo. “Annapolis is propaganda for [George W.] Bush and Mr Olmert. I am sure together they will put nice Mr Abbas [Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority] in a bad position,” he says, waving around a kebab skewer for emphasis.

“We are fed up [with peace talks]. There have been years of negotiations and what did we get? Nothing. No one believes that the Americans will do something for the Arabs. We have experience of this already,” he says.

Echoing a common sentiment among Palestinians, Mr Karoufe believes Mr Abbas should first heal the internal division brought about by the power struggle between his Fatah party and the Islamist Hamas group, which took control of the Gaza strip after a series of violent clashes in June. Hamas was pointedly excluded from the Annapolis meeting, part of a broader effort by Israel and the international community to isolate Palestinian militants.

“First we must be united, then we can go to the outside,” he says.

Sitting in his shop on a quiet Beit Jala square, Saber Shahwan, a grocer, is equally sceptical. “They have been talking for 50 years but they only speak,” he says.

Does he think the Israeli government is now ready to give Palestinians an independent state? “No. Never,” he answers.

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