Bart Wallet: 'Israel and the Palestinians both feel like victims, and both have reason to be'

INTERVIEW

The internet is full of videos of blood, bombs and Hamas mopeds carrying kidnapped Israelis away. “A war is being waged between Hamas and Israel, but there is also a PR war going on,” says Bart Wallet, professor of Jewish history at the University of Amsterdam. Wallet warns: 'Do not overestimate your own knowledge, but be well informed.'

Wallet is constantly called for an interview because of his extensive knowledge of early modern and modern Jewish history. Ask Wallet a question and he will explain it briefly and concisely. From the first Jewish migration in 1881 to which Palestinian leader has the political courage to strive for peace.

He sees it as his job to inform people well, especially with the tons of fake news that are circulating about the Israel-Hamas conflict. 'Many people form an opinion based on two or three videos they see. It is very emotion-oriented. But if you want to understand this conflict better, you need a long-term perspective and historical depth.'

Question: That's a good thing, because that's why we're calling you. Where in history should we start to understand what is happening in Israel now?

'We must go back to the fall of the great multi-ethnic empires from the end of the nineteenth century, such as the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburg Empire and the Russian Empire. These were empires in which many minorities with different languages, cultures and religions came together. But from the mid-nineteenth century onwards more and more groups broke out. They wanted to start their own business and create their own countries.”

Question: That development made it easier to start your own state, you would say.

'Yes, but the Jews did not fit into the new world that was being created. They live everywhere. The fact that so many national movements emerged before the First World War and that many of them saw Jews as a problem on the way to their own nation state, led, among other things, to the Jews saying: we are just like all those other peoples with our own culture. and our own language. We also want our own homeland. And of course it is clear where that should be. That's what we pray for every day: the Holy Land. We call that movement Zionism.”

Question: When did the migration of Jews begin?

“That started in 1881. But there were also Jewish communities in Palestine that were centuries old.”

Question: Isn't there also British colonialism involved?

'After the First World War, when most countries were created, the Middle East was also looked at. There were also all kinds of peoples who had the right to their own country, but were not yet ready for it according to the League of Nations, the predecessor of the UN. According to them, they should receive help from a seasoned 'senior' nation. There were two “volunteer countries” for this 'job': France and England. They both took over a number of countries, with the aim of guiding them towards independence. And Palestine goes to the British.”

Question: But then it turns out that not only Jews, but also Arabs live there.

'That's right, and as a result the British are actually moving quite quickly towards a two-state solution. That they say: we must also use the same process of nation building and state building for the Arab population.'

Question: How come this has - clearly - not been successful after all this time?

'The two national movements are very similar, but the tragedy is that they both want the same territory. They have the same national dream. But what has been a big problem from the start, and is little talked about, is that the Zionist movement arose earlier. The moment the British start helping to build their own nation state, it will be a gift from heaven for the Jewish population. They were ready.”

“The political infrastructure for a Jewish state was in place and the Zionist movement was a well-oiled machine. The British could quickly do business with them and then withdraw. But the Palestinian national movement only took off much later. That is what historians call the inequality of the simultaneous.'

Question: That is?

'That you have two national movements that on the one hand are very similar, but are in completely different phases. This makes it difficult to find a solution, because what is often good for one person - because it fits the phase the national movement is in - is then bad for another.'

Question: Why is it that the Palestinian national movement got off the ground so late?

'Because a the beginning, how should I say, they were largely beheaded. Not literally, but in the sense that new national borders were drawn. And this ensured that the Palestinian population was separated from the administrative, political and cultural elite in Damascus and Beirut.

The people who ended up in Palestine were generally illiterate. This meant that it took some time for a new political elite to be built up to lead the Palestinian national movement. The surrounding Arab countries have also long denied their support to the Palestinians. It was not until 1988 that Jordan recognized the legitimacy of the Palestinian national movement.”

Question: In the 1990s the time finally seemed to have come. Everyone knows the photos of the handshake between Israeli leader Shimon Peres and Palestinian leader Yassar Arafat in Washington.

'Yes, that was a period of hope. Somehow you can even say that the two movements speak the same political language. The Zionist understands the logic of Palestinian nationalism. And a Palestinian nationalist basically understands the logic of Zionists. They obviously disagree, but they speak the same language. In principle, this should allow compromises to be made.”

'Many mistakes have been made. But the main reason why the peace process was ultimately completely derailed is because in both societies there are extremist groups that do not want peace.'

'On the one hand, it is the settler movement that says: we want a great Israel. And there is no room for a Palestine. And on the other side are Hamas and the Islamic jihadists who say: we want a Palestine from the river to the sea. The extremes have hijacked both societies, effectively destroying hopes for peace.”

Question: In the 1990s it was a 'normal' regional conflict. That is clearly not the case anymore. How did that happen?

'Then we have to go back to 9/11 and The War on Terror. In addition, there is another very important conflict that has an influence that we are overlooking.'

Question: Which one is that?

'The Sunni alliance against the Shia alliance that causes many conflicts in the Middle East, but is also the basis of the proxy war (a conflict that a country fights through another party, ed.) in Yemen. Israel belongs to the Sunni side, along with Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan. And Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza on the Shiite side of Iran, the Al-Assad regime in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon.”

Question: How will the Palestinians and Israelis ever get out of this in one piece?

“The Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, like Israel, is in the Sunni alliance. As a result, there is a split in that alliance: a large part of the population has natural sympathy for the residents of Gaza, while at the same time the governments are very opposed to the influence of Iran.

The best chance for a solution is for Saudi Arabia and Israel to come up with real solutions for the Palestinians as part of a comprehensive peace deal. But it is clear to Israel that Hamas as a terrorist organization cannot play any role in peace negotiations.”

Question: The Israeli army could invade the Gaza Strip at any time. Why do they see that as the only option?

'Israel would rather have the uncertainty of what is to come than the devil who is there now. It is a very conscious gamble, because we do not know what will happen next with a ground offensive. It's really exciting.'

Question: Is there currently talk of peace in Israel?

“Most people, even peace activists, say the road to peace is through this war.”

Question: In all these years of oppression of Israel, but also Hamas, which rules with an iron hand, has there not been a cry among the Palestinians that they want to get rid of Hamas?

'If there was, you won't see it anytime soon. Citizens who sympathize with another Palestinian movement are intimidated, citizens suspected of having something to do with Israel are arrested and shot.”

Question: Can you expect people who have lived in an extreme situation for so long, with daily trauma, to ever come to reconciliation?

'We are indeed dealing with two traumatized populations here. All the wars that have been fought, all the terrorist attacks over the years. It is much. Everyone in Israel knows people who were killed or blown up. This also applies on the Palestinian side. That means you have to take the emotions on both sides so incredibly seriously.'

Question: Is there hope?

“If you look for it, you will certainly find it. There really are people who reach out to each other and try to see the other person beyond the pain. But that is of course a very difficult task.'

Both feel like victims. And both have good reasons for that. But at the same time you have to say - if you want a solution - that people have to dare to rise above. That takes political courage.