Virginia Tilley

Interview with Virginia Tilley in Johannesburg on 14th of september 2005 about her recent book "The One-State solution, a breakthrough for peace in the Israeli-Palestinian deadlock"…. .

IM: Dr V. Tilley got her BA in political science from Antioch college in 1986, went on to do an MA at the Center for contempory Arab studies at Georgetown university in 1988, followed by an MA in political science at the University of Winsconsin, Madison, in1993. In 1997 she was awarded a Phd in political science at the University of Winsconsin, Madison.

IM: Virginia, I've just dipped in your book, I can't say I've read it entirely but I'm very very impressed with the detail that you have gone into and with this concept of one way out for the Israeli Palestinian conflict . Up to now being a bit of a side line observer myself, Jewish as well, I have tended to opt for the federal solution to the conflict. If the Palestinians really want a state, which wouldn't be viable could it not be envisaged in the form of a Middle East federation, but before we go on to discuss your alternatives, which are entirely new to me, could you tell us how and why you came to specialize and be involved in this Middle Eastern conflict?

VT: Well, I first went to Jerusalem on a programme as an undergraduate, actually. And it was accidental, I didn't know anything about the conflict at the time. Jerusalem and Timbuctou were something far far away. But the moment I arrived I was gripped by the situation. It's a beautiful country and it's a compelling place, especially the old city of Jerusalem, where I arrived and the conflict is in your face. The moment you arrive in the airport, you begin to feel and see it. It's not subtle. And after that I was gripped and I went on to do the Masters in Arab Studies and continued to work for a number of years in Washington on human rights, work related to the conflict.

IM: In, from 1991 to 1993, I'm reading from your CV, you took part in Settlement Watch in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. How did you get into that?

VT: Well, that was actually based in Washington, D. C. My research had indicated that the real problem in the conflict was the settlements, but fundamentally this is a conflict about land. A lot of people at that time were working on a number of human rights problems related to the conflict—prisoners, women and agriculture, and the shootings and Palestinian violence and so forth. But I began to realize that the entire thing was oriented around land and that the *fait accompli* that was changing the situation was the settlements. So some colleagues and I proposed a special project to look in a focussed way at the settlements, and we got a grant from the McArthur Foundation and undertook it. So a lot of the actual on-the-ground research was coming from people in Israel or Palestine who were also concerned about the issue, and we were coordinating with them to try to put the data together and to present it in a way that people, policy makers particularly, could understand.

IM: In order to determine what was actually happening and to sift out the reality from the rethoric.

VT: Yeah, the rethoric is very confusing. But at that time, people, the rhetoric was still not mentioning the settlements, no one was paying much attention to the settlements, they were talking about peace in a number of other ways—the division of Jerusalem, the end of violence—but the settlements kept being put off to one side. And it was our understanding that they were growing and spreading, and that their roads were spreading, and we had begun to get maps. There were planning maps from the 1980s that showed where all of this was going to go, and where it was going to go was where it in fact went, which was to divide Palestinian territories into chunks that would then not possibly make a Palestinian state.

IM: The general media, news and television give the impression that the settlements are basically the result of fanatical religious types or ultranationalist Zionists and that the Israeli state is somewhat embarrassed by them, or accommodates them sometimes but is prepared to withdraw. There is a certain amount of confusion for people who are not entirely aware of the issues, in particular and more recently with the withdrawal from Gaza. One gets the impression that the Israeli government is prepared to withdraw settlements. Is this a false impression?

VT: Yes, it is, in two respects, you're touching on two elements of it. There is a very common misimpression that the settlements are the result of the settlers, of zealots , the religious fanatics and arch nationalists who have understood the settlement programme as a mission, whether it's a national or a religious mission . Of course these people are, and of course some of them feel that way, but that's not where the settlements project came from. The planning came from the nineteen-seventies. It was born and bred in the Jewish agency—settlement division, with maps and statistics and budgets and so forth—so the entire grid that we see today is the product of government planning. The Jewish agency is a government agency. So is the World Zionist Organisation. People forget this. And those two agencies together have orchestrated all of this. Every ministry is involved, every part of government is involved in funding these things. Hundreds of million dollars a year are going into the settlements from the government . So the idea that the government is somehow the passive recipient of this problem is a complete myth. The settlements are products of government planning and the settlers, the zealots, are simply offering the government plausible deniability in blaming somebody for it, in distracting media attention.

IM: In your book you trace the expansion of the settlements, back to the very beginnings of Israel, to 1948, and also, interestingly enough for me, point out that more recent historical work by Israeli historians has supported Palestinian accusations that their people were driven forcibly off the land in 1948, whereas I and I'm sure many other people, including Jews, have been left with the vision of Paul Newman and Exodus and how Palestinians were really very sulky about Jews being there and just left because they were sulking and they were encouraged by Arab states around. I didn't know that they had been actually driven off forcibly and violently, whereas this now appears to be the case and is not just a Palestinian accusation but is backed up by recent historical work. Can you talk about that?

VT: Yes, well, it's the foundation of the problem. Actually the foundation of the problem was before that though. The real problem we're looking at here is Zionism, and Zionism is not just one thing, there are many kinds of Zionism. But the kind of Zionism that won out and determined what happened in the land was something called

Revisionist Zionism, which understood that in order to have a Jewish national home you needed a Jewish state and in order to have that you needed a Jewish majority and in order to have that you needed to get rid of the Palestinians, because they **were** the majority, by a big margin. So the planning for 1948 for having to get rid of these people, to push them out of their homes, to get them off the land, went back years. In 1948, therefore, they understood what they had to do. They had the policy in place, so that when open hostility broke out, which they knew would occur, that the orders were in place and went out to the local commanders to expel the villagers and townspeople from their homes and set them on the roads. And that's what was done. That whole logic, that moment, was what Palestinians call the Nakbah, or the catastrophe. And the history of the State of Israel traces to that founding crime, founding human rights violation, ethnic cleansing . But the rationale and the philosophy of that goes back a bit further. And it's that idea that a Jewish national home requires a Jewish majority and that a Jewish majority can only be crafted by keeping Palestinians out. That is the conflict, that's the conflict we're seeing on the ground. Israel prides itself on being a democracy, but it wants to be Jewish and democratic, and in order to be both, it needs a Jewish majority. If that had not been their understanding, we wouldn't have the conflict today, we would have a state with Jews and Palestinians in it, probably sorting out some ethnic difficulties, but many democracies do. But that remains the problem, that's what the West Bank settlements are all about. It's actually Israel's language to call about Judaising the land. And it will have to be confronted.

IM: Following on from the analysis, what I really like about your book is that you go into detailed conjecture about what would happen if this were to be put on the table, the idea of integrating all of the people in Palestine, Palestinians and Jews , into a single state, a single democratic state and in particular you try to unravel the threads of Zionism in a specific chapter and point out that there was, a part of the Zionist's debate initially was, whether or not the people should be included in the country.

VT: Yes, one of the early camps in Zionism was very ardent about that. They pushed for what they called a bi-national state or a single, secular, democratic state, with great moral fortitude and also with a fear for what would happen if that weren't done. They were afraid that there would be a conflict and of course there was . That thread, that current of Zionist thought, never went away. That's why we have to be careful in talking about Zionism as one thing. There's always been a current within Zionists in the sense of people who want a Jewish national home, call for sharing a state, and have written great documents and philosophical treatises about that. Today quite a few intellectuals, Palestinians and Jews are going back to that writing and bringing it back up and rethinking those old ideas in an effort to make sense of a one-state solution.

IM: In dealing with the confusion around Zionism you point out that Zionism contains many different currents, or threads as you call them, and that there was a certain amount of confusion, but the very fact that there were these different currents and threads enabled it to have, paradoxically, a very broad base of support from world Jewry, and also meant that even secular democratically minded Jews, who are not in favour of present Israeli government policy fall into the trap of ascribing a certain mission to Jewish presence in Palestine .

VT: Yes, that's a very interesting problem. But some of the biblical language or religious language like aliyah, or these ideas of going up to God, have now been transferred over

to the idea of going up to Israel, to the secular State, to the physical state. This confusion allows for a lot of inarticulate emotion even in people who aren't particularly religious, liberal secular Jews, who still have their hearts stirred by the idea of going back to this place. The very idea of 'going back' to some place where their personal ancestors may never have been is one of the parts of the story—that the Jewish identity has come to understand that all Jews trace **familially** to Abraham and that they have therefore, somehow, this legacy and this right to this particular territory. This is a powerful nation-building idea to attach a people to a land. But in this case you have such diversity: you have religious people, some of whom are theocratic extremists, zealots; you have spiritual people who understand it in a much more soft and vague mystical sense that Jews have some kind of larger mission to bring justice to the world; you have people who think that both of those ideas are silly, that are pragmatic nation-building politicos. And they are all using the same language. So this language has, as you say, allowed people who would never get along—who wouldn't even want to live in the same neighbourhood with each other—to understand Israel as what they think it is. It's been a kind of a nationalist deal, and it's not a very happy deal because now there are these deep splits in Israeli politics that still pertain to those old divisions. And, as my book points out, this is one of the reasons why the settlements can't be withdrawn. It's not so much that everybody wants them there, because a lot of people don't want them there. It's that actually trying to withdraw from the settlements from what they understand that Judea and Samaria, the old biblical kingdoms of Jewish antiquity, would bring those internal divisions within Zionism to the fore. We saw just a little bit of that in Gaza with that withdrawal. The West Bank is the heartland however. Gaza, it was argued, was never in the Jewish kingdoms of antiquity. The West Bank is where it all played out.

So even people who are not wild-eyed zealots understand the West Bank today as an . integral part of the Jewish homeland and couldn't imagine giving it over to Palestinians, who they consider to be illegitimate occupiers of this territory. That level of division within Zionism, within Israeli politics, within Jewish national thought, is something that no Israeli government has any incentive to bring forward, to force into conflict. And in fact no Israeli government would survive the effort, because the way Israeli politics work, some cluster of parties would instantly pull out of the government and it would fall. But I think even that is not the real reason why no government would attempt it. They don't attempt it because papering over these divisions among Jews about what Israel's all about is actually central for Israel's image, both for Jews and non-Jews.

IM: To continue talking for a moment about Jewish attitudes or Zionist attitudes towards the problem, considering the solution of the 'The One State Solution' incorporating both Israelis and Palestinians, you say that there has to be an initial debate which is to defuse charges of anti-Semitism. I have found in talking to different people, in particular someone in my family with whom I can't have a rational conversation about this because she is entirely pro-Israel, is that whenever criticism is made of Israeli government policy it turns into a charge of anti-Semitism, not rational at all and you make a point that there first has to be a debate about that to bring the Israeli side or the hard liners in Israel to the table to talk

VT: Yes, it's a very serious problem, especially in the USA where it's been very intimidating to a lot of people. This argument is promoted by the Israeli government very strongly.

It comes out of something bigger, which is the idea that Israel is **the Jewish state** and that therefore to attack Israel is to attack Jewish people. And also because there are so many countries around the world whose governments are doing dreadful things to their populations, so why pick on Israel?—well, it must be anti-Semitism. Why single out Israel? That is a big obstacle to talking about the one-state solution because one of the first reactions people have to the idea of a one-state solution is, "Oh, you want to destroy Israel, you want to erase it." That is actually partly true. I mean to be up front about it, because Israel is presently based on a system of laws which differentially favour Jews over non-Jews. It's unlike every other western democracy in this respect that actual open ethnic discrimination is built into its Basic Law. In that sense, Israel indeed, in a one-state solution, would have to change, it would have to change its nature. Now, whether it would cease to be a Jewish national home is a separate question entirely. And I think that, by endorsing the core goal of Zionism—which was to recreate a Jewish national home in Palestine—we can hopefully get around that. The other answer to that question is [that] the Jews themselves differ very ferociously, as your family is demonstrating, about that precise problem. So, it's hardly a universal view [to support a Jewish state]. And actually Jews are some of the most eloquent denouncers of that argument. We borrow heavily from internal Jewish debates about that.

IM: You raise an interesting concept when talking about the different perspectives of the opposing parties to the conflict, which is that of mythical history and differing narratives. Is this your own concept and if not where did it come from?

VT: Scholars of nationalism have been observing this for a long time. Ernest Renan is well-known for having said this, that every nationalism relies partly on the distortion of history—the glorified hero, the magnificent battle—strategically omitting the not-so glorious scuzzy guys who killed two thousand people in the war of independence, the fact that the whole national population might have only been in the territory for a few hundred years and wiped out everyone who was there before. These are strategic things that the nationalist narrative typically assembles. Usually intellectuals have a heavy hand in this. Poets, scholars, novelists, artists, wax patriotic and come up with glorifying stories. State builders, governments, elites, typically select among things and choose something to be the flag, something to be the national anthem, and select some statues to put around the country to celebrate the glories of the past. This is classic nationalist stuff. You almost can't have nationalism without this, because nations are fundamentally **imagined communities** and if you're going to go out and die for them and do military service for them, you have to believe that they're something glorious and there's something wonderful and something bigger than you are. So, every country does this, Israel is no exception. The particular problem with Israel is that it has the Bible to back it up, so it isn't just the glories of the American revolution or the glories of the French revolution, it's all filtered in with these very emotional nostalgic stories—myths about Moses, about Abraham. Christians around the world celebrate these things, too—Christmas festivals and so forth, Mary on the donkey and this kind of thing—so it has a lot of resonance. And it has resonance for more than just the nation. It's easy to turn up one's nose at someone else's national myths. One 's own national myths typically are very compelling, but so other peoples' national myths typically are not. But in the case of Israel, for example, people in the USA, Christians in the United States, find it very easy and natural and rather moving to think of Jews being in this land, because of the Bible. There is also some mixture here. Some Zionists

are of course, religious Zionists, who are actually saying, "God gave us the land and it's our God-given right to take it back." Others are simply saying, in the magic of antiquity and the glories of such a deep past we have a better claim than anyone else. Everyone else who came after that, just wandered in, like the Arabs. The Muslims were invaders who took over and have no legitimate claim on the land. Even though they lived there for thirteen centuries, this is all eclipsed by this older history. And I don't think it would happen anything like the way it does if it weren't a biblical history.

But the mythic narrative for Israel also includes the expulsion of the Palestinians in 1948. There is a myth there that the Arab states ordered the Palestinians to leave. That's myth, it didn't happen. The truth is selectively covered up—that they were ordered out and forced out at gunpoint, and that there were major massacres, hundreds of people were shot against walls and this kind of thing. And that Arabs never offered peace, which is another myth. Arab states have offered peace over and over again, and Israelis and Jews around the world don't know that because it's been hidden. Syria offered a complete full peace deal a few years ago and you'll probably find out that there's nobody who knows that. The Saudi plan got a little bit more coverage but most people don't know about that either.

IM: What about the mythical historical narrative of the Palestinians?

VT: The Palestinian narrative is actually closer to what we know about the history because they had the advantage, an advantage that any nation builder has, of being the indigenous people of the country. So they could point to their own villages and towns and say, "look, we really were here." They don't have great glorious leaders in their mythic narrative because they didn't ever have any. The only mythologized leader was Arafat, who was of course fairly disgusting, especially in the latter decades. They have had to work to try to create the idea of a distinct Palestinian nationalism that is somehow distinguishable from Syrian nationalism. Because before the division, before the Mandate, after World War 1, these divisions didn't work this way and Palestinians understood themselves to be kind of a part of a seamless continuum with Arabs in Lebanon and Arabs in Syria, the whole fertile crescent. So once Israel formed, and once Palestinians found themselves cut off—and especially in 1967, when the West Bank was taken and the Gaza strip was taken and the Sinai was taken, and suddenly they were truly cut off from the rest of the Arab world—then they had to put together something called Palestinian nationalism in a whole new way with specific borders. And in order to do that that they had to celebrate, discover and develop and celebrate cultural and folkloric elements like debkeh, the dance, Palestinian dress, and the music and the poetry. So that was their nation-building process to try to make ethno-nationalist sense of those particular boundaries. "What distinguishes us from the Syrians? Well, they dance it this way, we dance it that way; their embroidery looks this way, ours looks this way." That was a bit artificial, like it always is. But actually, a lot of the Palestinian narrative has now been confirmed, in terms of the struggle. Events have been confirmed by Jewish historians. And of course Palestinian historians, who of course are just as good as Jewish historians, never have the credibility of Jewish audiences. Now [that] the Jewish historians have confirmed that story, as have a lot of independent outside scholars, the Palestinian narrative is starting to bleed into the Israeli Jewish narrative in very uncomfortable ways.

IM: Now a final question, because we do have to wind up this interview somehow, is why would Palestinian nationalists abandon fighting for a separate Palestinian state, at the current time?

VT: Well, there's an odd history with that, which it's interesting people aren't talking about very much any more. But Palestinian nationalism up until 1988 understood that the goal was the Palestinian state which would embrace the entire country, the entire Israel and the occupied territories. There was a bit of a murky sense in there about what the position of Jews would be in that country. According to the PLO charter, Jews who traced their ancestry to before the formation of Israel would be able to stay and have citizenship because—this is the odd thing—Palestinian nationalism is not precisely an ethnic nationalism. It pertained to the indigeousness of the people on the land, which had always included Jews, Muslims, Christians, whoever was living there, right? So actually Palestinian nationalism, although it was called 'Palestinian,' meant people from Palestine. It was not precisely an ethnic identity. The giving up of that dream and recognizing Israel as a Jewish state, and admitting that they couldn't ever get it back and that they would have to make do with a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, was therefore a fairly recent adjustment. It was something that came up in the Arafat period. But that created a problem which no-one is talking about, which is now, "What is Palestinian nationalism? Is it an ethnic nationalism, if only in not being Jewish?" It's because [of the question] what is the status of Jews in a Palestinian state? Well, presumably it would be fine to be Jewish in a Palestinian state. But now that there's a 'Jewish state' and a 'Palestinian state' next to each other, it creates a lot of questions about just what's going on.

What this means, I think, is that it's a lot easier for Palestinians to go back to the idea of a one-state solution, which was their idea for a long time—with the major adjustment that all Jews in Israel would now be citizens of the state, which is over four million people. That's easier for the Palestinians because they have a long history of understanding 'Palestinian-ness' as multi-ethnic anyway. The big difficulty of this whole thing is for Zionism. It's for Israeli Jews and Jews generally, who understand that the Jewishness of Israel is something that is precious and vital, perhaps even central to Jewish survival, and must be preserved at all costs. So the idea of sharing a state with a population which is at least as big as it is, in one democratic system, is frightening. Even if you think the Palestinians won't throw you into the sea or try to ruin you, it still raises the question of what will happen to our precious Jewish-national life. Will it be swamped, will it be overcome, will it be dissolved, will something precious disappear from the Earth forever, that we feel we should have a right to have? So these are very deep and complicated problems for Jews. Contemplating a one state solution, it's very understandable that they would be scared, that they would have nationalist issues about this. But what I'm trying to point out is there is no choice. There is no viable Palestinian state. The formula's very unstable. It's going to create a lot of conflict that we can no longer afford to allow. It's not a stable solution for Israel anyway. And the basic problem is that favouring Jews discriminates even against 20 per cent of the Israeli population which is not Jewish, in ways that none of the western democracies have endorsed, whereas Israel likes to consider itself a western democracy. All of them have moved on and Israel's the only one that clings to that kind of thing. That is unstable. It's not good for Israelis. It's not a democratic system, it's not liberal, it's not just, and it's dangerous. So the dream, the Zionist dream of a majority-Jewish state has to adjust somehow. And I'm proposing that, in debates toward a one state solution, that be kept

in mind—that the Jewish national home has a deep history here, which must be incorporated into this idea of the one-state solution. Jewish statehood, just like any ethnic statehood, has to be considered anachronistic, outmoded and dangerous, and that's what we need to work on. And that distinction is very delicate and, as you point out, it touches on questions of the appearance of anti-Semitism and so forth.

IM: I just would like to conclude by saying that the book "The One-State Solution" is available from the University of Michigan Press at Ann Arbor.