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The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: One State Versus Two States

Background

The signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat produced high expectations that, at long last, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was on the verge of resolution. While not explicitly stated in this agreement, it was widely assumed that the objective of the negotiations based on Oslo would be two states, Israel, the democratic nation state of the Jewish people, and a state of Palestine for the Palestinian people, existing side-by-side in peace and security. What was widely assumed in 1993 subsequently became a matter of entrenched policy in Israel and among Palestinian leadership. It has also been embraced by the Quartet--the United States, Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations.

Yet, despite numerous attempts over the course of more than twenty years with a variety of Israeli and Palestinian leaders, and with the active facilitation of three American administrations, a negotiated two-state resolution of the conflict has not been achieved. This failure has bred deep frustration on both sides and throughout the international community. As a result, there are calls from some quarters to abandon the two-state vision, and, instead, to create one bi-national state between the Jordan River and Mediterranean Sea.

One State Is Not a Just Solution and Makes No Practical Sense

Despite the difficulty in reaching two states for two peoples, it remains the most just solution and the only viable option. Here's why: Israeli Jews and Palestinians, as distinct peoples, are entitled to the right of national self-determination. This right is based both on moral principles and international law, including as entrenched in the Charter of the United Nations. These two peoples possess different languages, religions, cultures and historical narratives fundamentally at odds with each other. Practically speaking, trying to meld these two peoples, who have been in conflict for close to a century, into one cohesive political and social unit would be virtually impossible. Indeed, what we have seen in Eastern Europe (e.g., former Yugoslavia), and especially in the Middle East in recent years (e.g., Syria, Lebanon and Iraq), is that even within the same or similar religious and ethnic groups, severe violence has accompanied efforts to forge multi-ethnic, multi-religious states.

The United States, which is not an apt model, uniquely has succeeded in creating a cohesive multi-ethnic society. This is because, unlike Israel and many other states based on ethnic and cultural nationalism, the U.S. represents a form of civic nationalism. Religious and ethnic groups, while maintaining some of their distinctive characteristics, are expected to embrace America as their primary identity, speaking English and adopting American culture and history as their own. Clearly, that is not the way it would operate between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs. Indeed, most countries in Europe are democratic ethnic nation states, very much along the lines of Israel's identity. The existence of a sizable Arab ethnic minority in Israel creates certain tensions, but it does not detract from Israel's legitimacy as the democratic Jewish nation state of the Jewish people.

The Parties Themselves Do Not Want One State

Even if a unitary Palestinian/Israeli bi-national state made sense conceptually, which it doesn't, the parties themselves are not interested in pursuing such an outcome. It is true that there are some political and civil society

voices on both sides calling for consideration of the one state option. Following the collapse of the U.S. facilitated negotiations last April, 2014, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has been bitterly attacking Israel on a number of fronts. But he continues to unequivocally affirm his support for two states, seeking an independent Palestine in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem.

In Israel, there are some figures on the political right challenging the wisdom of continuing to seek two states, including the increasingly influential Naftali Bennett. Prime Minister Netanyahu made comments on the eve of the March 2015 election suggesting that he might not be in favor of a Palestinian state. But he later qualified those comments, explaining he remains committed to the two states vision as a matter of policy. While there is skepticism in both the Israeli and Palestinian publics about the prospect for achieving two states, there is still broad public sentiment against one state. According to the December 2014 poll conducted by Khalil Shikaki, director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, 71% of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip reject the one-state option. A June 2014 survey of Israelis conducted by the Dialog Institute found that 60% of the respondents expressed support for a Palestinian state alongside Israel that resulted from a negotiation.

International Rejection of One State

It is not without reason or recognition of the history of the conflict that the international community (i.e., the Quartet comprised of the U.S., Russia, the EU and UN), which has a hard time reaching consensus on many things, is unified in support of two states. In 1936, the Peel Commission, a British Royal Commission of Inquiry, examined the situation of Jews and Arabs living in Mandatory Palestine -- the area between the Jordan River and Mediterranean Sea -- and recommended partition into two separate states. This partition approach subsequently was adopted on November 29, 1947 by the United Nations General Assembly.

As a consequence of Israel's War of Independence, Jordan seized control of the West Bank, which was intended to be the heart of the Arab state under the UNGA resolution, as well as East Jerusalem. Israel then occupied those areas and the Gaza Strip as a result of the 1967 Six Day War. In the late 1980s, Jordan relinquished all claims to the West Bank and Jerusalem, and supported emergence of an independent Palestinian state in those areas. Egypt has never expressed any interest in retaining the Gaza Strip, which, presumably, would become part of a future Palestinian state.

Israeli Settlements Do Not Preclude Two States

Some argue that Israel's Jewish settlement activity in the West Bank since 1967 de facto has eliminated the potential for two states. There is no question that the settlements enterprise has been controversial, with criticism of Israeli policy coming from wide segments in Israel and from the American Jewish community. It also has been the source of significant tension between Israeli governments and U.S. administrations for decades.

However, Israeli settlements in the West Bank do not preclude the emergence of a negotiated two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. First of all, settlements need not be permanent. In fact, Israel has a history of dismantling them: settlements in the Sinai Peninsula were dismantled in the context of the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt, and they were dismantled in the Gaza Strip as part of Israel's unilateral disengagement ordered by the late Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. A series of Israeli Prime Ministers, Yitzhak Rabin, Ehud Barak, Ehud Olmert, Ariel Sharon, and Benjamin Netanyahu, have expressed a readiness to evacuate some West Bank settlements in the context of a peace agreement with the Palestinians.

In addition, the large majority of Israel settlers (80% of them) resides in blocs close to the 1967 armistice boundaries, the so-called Green Line, and do not impinge on the heartland of the West Bank. That means an agreement for two states "based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps," a formula proposed by President Obama and reportedly accepted by both Abbas and Netanyahu in their 2014 negotiations, would require relocation of a relatively modest number of Jewish settlers. Moreover, most settlers are employed inside Israel and the Jewish and Palestinian infrastructures remain largely separate. Thus, the return of settlers to pre-'67 borders, while certainly not an easy proposition, could be carried out without dramatic disruptions especially if there were economic incentives for taking such action.

Furthermore, there is also the possibility that negotiations could lead to some Israeli Jewish citizens remaining as residents within a Palestinian state. A Palestinian ethnic state need not be completely homogeneous. Indeed, some 20% of Israel's citizens are Palestinian Arabs.

Both Sides Responsible for Preserving Negotiated Two State Option

While settlements do not preclude a two-state solution, Palestinians could reasonably see them as obstacles to achieving a contiguous and viable state. That is why a significant number of Israeli leaders are suggesting that more could be done to condition the environment for two states by announcing a total settlement freeze beyond the blocs and/or starting a process of voluntary relocation to the pre-1967 lines of settlers now living beyond those blocs.

President Abbas has embarked on a campaign to achieve international recognition for Palestinian statehood outside of negotiations with Israel. This is a follow-up to his successful effort in 2012 to obtain recognition by the UNGA of Palestine as a non-member observer state. Abbas also has submitted an application to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for the purpose of initiating prosecutions against Israeli military and political officials. In some respects, these diplomatic initiatives could be seen as an understandable response to Israeli actions, especially settlement activity, which from a Palestinian perspective are seen as harmful to the goal of two states. Some also have argued that recognition of Palestinian statehood at the UN actually could be interpreted as a positive development for Israel as it would further anchor in international legitimacy the concept of two separate states. While these actions per se do not preclude a two state outcome, they detract from an environment conducive to restarting and sustaining a direct negotiation between the parties, which, in the end, is the only way this conflict can be resolved.

The viability of a future state of Palestine will depend on creating a strong economic base, an advanced educational system, adequate housing for growing numbers of residents, and an effective governance infrastructure. Former Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad made significant headway in all of these areas. It is incumbent on the new Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah, working in cooperation with Israel and the international community, to continue this process. The building of a successful Palestinian state on the ground can and should continue while we wait for negotiations to produce one de jure.

Different Motivations for Supporting One State

Those supporting the one state option have different motivations. Some may be idealists, mistakenly believing that an Israeli Jewish/Palestinian bi-national state is a workable arrangement. Many others are simply anti-Zionists who would deny the Jewish people their right to self-determination. The BDS (Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions) movement is heavily populated by those who fall into the latter category. Among the positions espoused by this movement is the full return of Palestinian refugees and their descendants into Israel, which potentially involves millions of people, and would mean the end of Israel's identity as the nation state of the Jewish people.

BDS movement founder Omar Barghouti: "going back to the two-state solution, besides having passed its expiry date, it was never a moral solution to start with..." and good riddance! The two-state solution for the Palestinian Israeli conflict is finally dead. But someone has to issue an official death certificate before the rotting corpse is given a proper burial and we can all move on and explore the more just, moral and, therefore, enduring alternative for peaceful coexistence between Jews and Arabs and mandate Palestine, the one state solution." "The one state solution means a unitary state, where, by definition, Jews will be a minority."

Longtime Israel critic and BDS activist Norman Finkelstein: "We have to be honest, and I loathe the disingenuousness. They [BDS] don't want Israel... And they think they're very clever because they know the result of implementing all three [demands] is what? What's the result? You know and I know, what's the result? There's no Israel."

Conclusion

On its face, one bi-national state made up of Jews and Palestinian Arabs is a prescription for endless conflict, not

peace. The parties themselves do not want it; they seek separation in the form of two independent states between the Jordan River and Mediterranean Sea. The international community overwhelmingly rejects the one state option and supports two states based on negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. Those urging a one state option, by and large, are anti-Zionists who never supported the idea of Israel serving as the nation state of the Jewish people.

Those who support genuine peace and reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians should encourage the parties to restart negotiations and sustain them until they reach the desired outcome, and, in the meantime, to refrain from policies and actions that undermine the peacemaking environment, and to take affirmative steps to build the framework for a successful Palestinian state.

Talking Points

- Given the continuing failures of Israel-Palestinian negotiations, it may be tempting to give up on the two-state vision; but it is the only just and practical solution available.
- Despite skepticism on both sides, Israeli and Palestinian leaders and publics still want peace based on two separate states, not one.
- For close to a century the international community consistently has embraced the two-state vision, which provides the basis for ongoing efforts toward peace and reconciliation.
- Israeli settlements and President Abbas' unilateral diplomacy at the UN and the ICC are seen as impediments to progress by the respective parties, but neither precludes achievement of a negotiated two-state agreement.
- Some support the one-state option out of a sincere desire to see Israeli-Palestinian peace; but others, especially leadership of the BDS movement, do so out of an animus to Israel's existence as the nation state of the Jewish people.

Further Reading

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Gil Troy and Martin J. Raffel. *Israel; Jewish and Democratic* (Israel Action Network, 2013).

Shaul Arieli. *Why Settlements Have Not Killed the Two-State Solution* (Britain Israel Communications & Research Centre, 2013).