

No Room for Two States: The Case for a Single State Solution for Palestine is Irrefutable

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Is there truly hope for the establishment of a viable, sovereign Palestinian state living side-by-side with Israel in peace? Sadly, I doubt it very much, at least in the foreseeable future, in view of current local, regional and international conditions.

The creation of a Palestinian state should not be regarded as an end in itself, but rather as a means for resolving a long and complex historical conflict. Accordingly, our judgement on a formula for a proposed state should rest not so much on whether it complies with necessary formal and legal conditions as whether it meets that overriding criterion: will it serve to draw to a close, once and for all, that protracted conflict?

After all, the concrete existence of a Palestinian state with certain specifications could, in itself, become an instrument in the conflict as opposed to a step towards its solution. The conflict between the Palestinians and the Zionist movement is not over disputed borders or material interests and, therefore, resolvable by merely coming to an agreement over permanent borders and a give-and-take over material interests. Rather, it is a conflict between two identities, each of which claims sole propriety right over a given territory. Such a conflict cannot be solved by the same means that are brought to bear on conventional international conflicts.

Identity conflicts can only be solved by two means, either by the overwhelming defeat of one side by the other, or through compromise, after both sides finally reach the conviction that continuing the zero-sum game, whereby a gain for one side must result in an equal loss for the other, will not result in victory over and elimination of the other side. I believe that in identity conflicts compromise is only possible when there is mutual recognition of the other party's equal rights.

If we were to apply this concept to the Palestinian- Zionist conflict, a compromise solution would require that both sides commit themselves fully to two indispensable, mutually complementary conditions. The first is for them to accept the fair and equal partition of the territory under dispute. The second is for them to agree to complete equality in rights and duties in the process of building peaceful, friendly, mutually beneficial relations. Unfortunately, there are no signs that these conditions can be met today or even in the foreseeable future.

The total land area designated for a Palestinian state, as a proposed solution to the conflict, amounts to no more than 10 per cent of the actual territory under dispute, which is historic Palestine. Moreover, that designated area is not geographically contiguous, but rather consists of disconnected and isolated patches of territory. If and when that state is founded,

it will not have an army or any autonomous means to defend itself and its borders will be subject to constant surveillance by land, sea and air. But if it is to be founded at all, that phantom state will first have to recognise Israel's right to 90 per cent of the disputed territory, the purely Jewish character of that state and, hence, its right to remain eternally open to Jews from around the world, along with the right of that state to an immensely powerful army equipped with every available type of weapon, including nuclear missiles.

Obviously, there can be nothing remotely resembling equality in a relationship between such disparate states. A Palestinian state so encumbered by restrictions and conditions can only be an Israeli dependency subjected to total Israeli control. This is not a situation conducive to lasting peaceful coexistence, because the very conditions of dependency and subordination to Israeli must inevitably continue to fire the Palestinian urge for true national independence and expression. At the same time, it is difficult to perceive how such a state, so crippled at birth that it is little more than an Israeli protectorate, could eventually evolve into a fully-fledged viable state capable of safeguarding Palestinian rights and fulfilling their aspirations.

There are several reasons for this. First, Israel has given no indication of a willingness to set aside its policy of imposing de facto realities by force of arms in favour of the search for a historic compromise, which means that Israel will perpetually seek to sustain its qualitative superiority — military superiority in particular — not only over the Palestinians but over all Arab and Islamic nations combined.

Second, the US can no longer maintain even a façade of impartiality now that its positions on the Middle East conflict have become virtually identical to those of Israel. In fact, some powerful and influential forces in the US are more pro-Zionist than Israeli Zionists and have pitted their weight behind the most extreme forces in Israel, which reject out of hand a settlement founded upon a historic compromise with the Palestinians. It is, therefore, impossible to envision an American government willing and able to pressure Israel into accepting the conditions for a just and lasting settlement.

Third, joint US-Israeli efforts have succeeded in excluding the UN from any involvement in the peace process, with the result that this process has been effectively stripped of any framework of international legitimacy. It is patently obvious that all relevant international resolutions and instruments have been discarded as bases for negotiations, with the sole exception of Resolution 242, which favours Israel's negotiating position and paves the way for a settlement that reflects the actual balance of powers on the ground as opposed to the principles of justice and fairness enshrined in all other UN resolutions and instruments.

Fourth, the Palestinian cause no longer occupies the priority it once had on the agenda of the official Arab order. What was once a central and unifying Arab- Islamic cause has been effectively reduced to a local problem that primarily concerns the Palestinians alone. Arab governments hide behind the current Palestinian rift, which they played no small part in precipitating, to conceal their shift in stance, and they have thus effectively become accomplices in Israel's criminal blockade of the Palestinian people, which is intended to force the Palestinians to their knees and to accept Israeli conditions for a settlement. Again, there are no signs that this situation is about to change in the near future.

Clearly, then, the so-called Palestinian state that is supposed to arise from the current "peace process" is never going to lead to a just and lasting solution to the conflict. Indeed,

that conception of a state has been specifically designed to help Israel ward off what it regards as the foremost threat, which it unabashedly terms the “Palestinian demographic bomb”. With considerable perseverance and dexterity, Israel managed to steer negotiations currently taking place with the Palestinian Authority into a long, dark tunnel, the only glimmer of light at the end of which is a congenitally disfigured state that will ultimately prove a means for inflaming tensions rather than ending them.

It seems to me, therefore, that the Palestinians and Arabs have no other choice but to abandon the two- state solution and rehabilitate that solution the Palestine Liberation Organisation espoused until the mid- 1980s, which is the creation of a single, unified democratic state, in which all its citizens — Muslims, Christians or Jews — are equal. Some might counter that this proposal is so divorced from reality that its only effect will be to drive the Palestinians and Arabs into chasing a new mirage. Naturally, such sceptics will easily find support for their argument, especially given that Israel would never agree to such a solution or even take it seriously as a negotiating basis. These sceptics may have a point, but I would counter that this proposal is no less idealistic than the Arab Peace Initiative. At the same time, it is superior in many ways.

The two-state solution, as understood in the Arab initiative adopted at the Beirut Arab summit, is radically different to the two-state solution as understood by the Israeli interpretation of the Bush “vision”. Although Israel and the US have never openly rejected the Arab initiative and only recently announced that they welcomed some of its “positive points”, they have no intention of adopting it, as it stands, as a basis for negotiations with the Arabs. Under current balances of power, since the Arabs neither have the power to impose their initiative nor the ability to withdraw from the current “process”, even if they wanted to, their initiative will be chipped away at until all that is left is the Bush “vision” as interpreted by Israel. That eventuality will, in turn, take the peace process back to square one, and the endless cycle of Israeli coercion to impose its own conditions for a settlement will begin again. Since the Arabs are not prepared for direct military confrontation with Israel, reformulating the Arab position on the basis of the one-state solution would offer a much more rational — and much less costly — way out of their predicament.

The single, bi-national democratic state solution has the advantage of conforming to modern liberal democratic principles officially espoused in the West and in Israel itself. It could therefore stand a good chance of eliciting a positive response abroad that would acquire impetus, especially if the Palestinians and Arabs unified themselves behind this alternative in a serious and constructive way. In addition, this solution would favour innovative ways of overcoming the most obdurate obstacles to a settlement — notably the questions of Jerusalem and Palestinian refugees. The chances of ensuring the administration of Christian, Jewish and Muslim holy places by independent religious authorities in a climate of freedom and tolerance are definitely higher and easier to safeguard in a democratic state. The Palestinian refugee problem also becomes solvable in a unified secular state if it is linked to the right to return as a right extended to both Jews and Palestinians.

I fully appreciate the difficulties standing in the way of the establishment of a unified secular democratic state in Palestine in the near future. However, in the long run, this is the only solution capable of keeping the Middle East and the rest of the world away from the dangerous brink towards which all are heading. On the one hand, it can forestall the victory of Zionist racism which would open the gates to the forces of bigotry and intolerance on this side that have been pushing in from the sidelines and clamouring to meet fire with fire. On the other hand, if that solution succeeded in Palestine, it would set into motion a tide of

democratisation that would sweep the entire region, just as occurred in Eastern Europe in the 1990s. In addition, it would prevent the fragmentation of the region and stimulate a dynamic process of social and economic development.

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