

Rethinking the Two-State Solution

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Brief Analysis

On September 23, 2008, Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Giora Eiland and Ambassador Martin Indyk addressed a Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute. General Eiland is former head of the Israeli National Security Council and currently a senior researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv. Ambassador Indyk directs the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

GIORA EILAND

Within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict lies a paradox. Although the two-state solution is well known and widely accepted, and although there is international consensus regarding the need for it, little progress has been made to that end. This means that neither side desires the solution nor is willing to take the necessary risks to move forward and come to an agreement. Ultimately, the most the Israeli government can offer the Palestinians -- and survive politically -- is far less than what any Palestinian leadership can accept. As such, there is a gap between the two sides that continues to widen as the years go on.

In many aspects, the current situation is worse than it was eight years ago. In 2000, there were three leaders who were both determined and capable of reaching an agreement: U.S. president Bill Clinton, Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak, and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. That type of leadership is missing today. In addition, while the two sides enjoyed a reasonable level of security, cooperation, and trust in 2000, the subsequent intifada has created a completely different situation on the ground today. The rise of Hamas also poses a serious threat to any potential solution. Hamas was an opposition group in 2000, and the Palestinian Authority was capable of acting against its will. Today, it seems that even if Hamas were to lose control of Gaza and its majority in the Palestinian legislature, it would be strong enough politically and militarily to undermine any political agreement. Finally, there are a growing number of Israeli settlers in the West Bank that the Israeli government may not be willing or even capable of evacuating.

On what basis can one believe that what failed eight years ago during optimal circumstances could possibly be successful today when the situation is much worse? It has become clear that the conventional two-state solution -- the establishment of two independent states between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea -- is not attractive enough for either side to move forward. Thus, in order to avoid prolonging the conflict, it is necessary to modify the solution in the hope of persuading both parties to take additional risks or make further concessions.

One variation is to give Jordan security responsibility for the West Bank. It would be preferable to give this role to Jordan rather than to the Palestinian Authority for one main reason: Hamas. There is valid concern that if a Palestinian state were established in the West Bank, Hamas would inevitably gain control. Contracting out the security responsibility to Jordan while ensuring Palestinian political autonomy could prevent the threat Hamas poses to Israel. Moreover, in light of Hamas's control of Gaza, if a state were established in the West Bank, Palestinians might be more prepared to live under Jordan than Hamas.

The other alternative is a regional solution. The conventional two-state solution leaves two major problems unsolved: the daunting prospect of evacuating roughly 100,000 Israelis from the West Bank and Gaza's lack of the necessary land and resources to be part of a viable state. Ultimately, the need is for more space -- the one thing the Arab world can provide. Thus, the problem could be solved with a multilateral land swap involving Egypt, Israel, and the Palestinian territories. Egypt could cede a modest amount of land to significantly increase the size of the Gaza Strip. Israel would then keep a percentage of the West Bank equal to the amount of land being given by Egypt to Gaza. In return, Israel would grant an equivalent part of the Negev desert to Egypt and create a direct corridor from Egypt to Jordan.

Although many of the core issues of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are difficult, the main inhibitors are territory and security. The piece of land in question is simply too small and too inadequate to satisfy both sides, and it is up to neighboring states to make their own contributions if a two-state solution is to succeed. If this option does not seem feasible, it is necessary to come up with alternative resolutions to the conflict. Bridging the ever widening gap between the two sides will be impossible if the obsession with only one solution persists. Instead of continuing with the same approach that has repeatedly failed in the past, it is time to explore other possibilities. Otherwise, the solution will continue to elude us -- even though everybody wants it.

MARTIN INDYK

Although Giora Eiland offers interesting ideas, they are not viable options. His challenge to provide alternative solutions is important, but he takes a quintessentially Western approach to the situation. Americans are drawn to it out of the belief that every problem has a solution, but his solutions are inherently flawed.

In terms of the Jordanian option, ultimately no Jordanian government would be willing to take over from Israel the responsibility for policing Palestinians. West Bank Palestinians pose a demographic threat to Jordanians. Furthermore, Eiland moves past the issue of Palestinian identity too quickly in suggesting that Palestinians in the West Bank would be willing to accept a Jordanian national identity. It is highly doubtful the Palestinians would easily consent to this. As for the regional option, Arab states have historically been unwilling to engage in this type of solution. Given Egypt's insistence that the tiny Sinai border area of Taba be brought to international arbitration in the 1980s, it is unrealistic to expect the Egyptians to willingly give up any territory in the Sinai for the sake of their Palestinian neighbors.

At this point, it seems that Israelis and Palestinians cannot achieve a two-state solution alone; third-party intervention is necessary to establish a lasting peace. Egypt and Jordan -- the two Arab neighbors most directly affected by this situation -- are contributing, but perhaps less than Washington would like. Still, from Egypt's role in negotiating a ceasefire and policing the border with Gaza, to Jordan's training of Palestinian security services, their contributions should not be underestimated. Their involvement is helping create circumstances that may make a two-state solution more viable. We must try to support those who have the will to make peace and strengthen their capabilities. We have helped the Jordanians, but while some progress is being made, that assistance is not enough. The participation of the rest of the Arab states is essential to moving the process forward.

Nevertheless, the progress since Israel made peace with Egypt prevails over the aforementioned obstacles. At a minimum, Israel enjoys peace with Egypt and Jordan, and Israeli governments have made great strides in accepting the two-state solution. Also, although Hamas is ascendant, one can argue that it is gradually coming to terms with Israel's reality, as demonstrated by the informal ceasefires negotiated with Israel in Gaza. Furthermore, most of the problems Eiland raises are actually amenable to solutions, but require political will on both sides. Obstacles such as the mass evacuation of Israeli settlers and the refugee problem are not insurmountable. They require courageous leadership and a willingness to speak the truth to one's people.

The more doubts that are raised and the more alternatives that are offered, the better the two-state solution looks. Palestinian and Israeli governments have had serious negotiations in the past year and have arrived back at the point they were in 2000 after the development of the Clinton parameters. This progression proves the viability of the basic ideas that Clinton presented eight years ago. In the long term, this is not the moment to abandon the two-state solution: It is the time to inject the effort with greater urgency.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Sana Mahmood. ❖

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