

Is the 'Two-State Solution' Still Relevant?

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On September 20, 2008, Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Giora Eiland and Marwan Muasher addressed The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference. General Eiland is a senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv and director of its Program on IDF Force Structure. Mr. Muasher is senior vice president of external affairs at the World Bank and former Jordanian foreign minister, deputy prime minister, and ambassador to Israel and the United States.

The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Giora Eiland

Israeli prime ministers have been trying to solve the Palestinian problem since the time of Menachem Begin. Various methods have been attempted, including West Bank autonomy and the Oslo process, which began in 1993 and culminated with the Clinton-Barak-Arafat round of diplomacy in 2000. All of these attempts failed.

There is a paradox here: Everyone agrees that it is important to resolve the conflict, and that the way to do so is by means of the two-state solution. Nevertheless, the peace process has been unsuccessful. The solution eluded us even in 2000 -- when both Yasser Arafat and Ehud Barak were very popular, Hamas was less relevant, there were fewer Israeli settlers, and the overall security situation was good. Eight years later, we are further away than ever. The problem, it seems, lies in the concept.

The crux of this paradox is clear: the most Israel can offer is less than the minimum the Palestinian Authority can accept. Under the parameters being discussed, Israel would have indefensible borders and Palestine would not be a viable state. Accordingly, we need to consider other options. One potential solution is Palestinian political autonomy coupled with Jordanian responsibility for security. Another alternative is a regional solution, with land swaps between Israel, Egypt, and the Palestinians.

The Jordanian option, long considered infeasible, is now a possibility for several reasons. The Palestinians may decide that life under Jordanian security control is better than life under Hamas, which otherwise will inevitably take over the West Bank. From the Jordanian perspective, further Hamas gains would undermine Amman by strengthening the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood. The Jordanian option is also one of the few scenarios under which Israel would feel safe. After all, rockets have been introduced into the security equation, and there is no way of stopping them without controlling the territory from which they are being launched.

Similarly, the regional option would solve several of the problems inherent in the current approach. If a Palestinian state were created under the traditional parameters, the rapidly growing population of the Gaza Strip would soon overwhelm the small land area, and building a seaport there would cause severe environmental damage to the coastline. Meanwhile, in the West Bank, Israel would face the daunting challenge of removing 100,000 settlers. The answer to all of these obstacles would be for Egypt to cede enough land to double or triple Gaza's size. Israel would then annex an equivalent amount of land from the West Bank (roughly 12 percent of that territory), which would

reduce the number of relocated settlers to 30,000. In return, Israel would cede Negev land -- again, in equal amounts -- to Egypt, creating a direct corridor to Jordan. A railway could then be built connecting the Red Sea to a now-sustainable port in an enlarged Gaza, which would also have the space to build an international airport. In addition, Israel would allow the Egyptian military to deploy in the Sinai.

In contrast, the peace initiative proposed by the Arab League in 2002 is no solution at all. It asks Israel to return to the pre-1967 borders, but it would not insist that Egypt and Jordan undertake the same security responsibilities they had prior to 1967. Without a credible allocation of such responsibilities, it would be nearly impossible to enforce the overall security requirements of any agreement. International forces have proven themselves unreliable in this regard, and the Arab security guarantees offered thus far are equally so. Israel cannot be asked to sacrifice everything for mere words.

Marwan Muasher

The two-state solution is relevant today because all other options are worse. A one-state solution (an Israeli-Palestinian binational state) is contrary to Israel's *raison d'être*. Indefinite occupation is immoral. Unilateral withdrawal has failed twice, in Lebanon and Gaza. Jordan and Egypt cannot take control of security because such an approach ignores the Palestinians' desire for independence, and because no one in Jordan would support it.

It is critical to resolve the conflict as soon as possible because time will not do so. On the contrary, the demographic trends among Jews and Arabs mean that delaying will only lead to the end of Israel. Moreover, the status quo in the Arab world fuels radicalization -- the longer the occupation continues, the more difficult it will be for Israel to find peace partners. Those who argue that time is needed to build trust must recognize that opposition to peace will grow during that interval as well. Israel should take advantage of the moderate sentiment in the Arab world today and accept the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002.

Israel's stated goal is to be accepted within the region, and the Arab Peace Initiative would grant it acceptance by all members of the Arab League. These states would guarantee Israel's security, thereby alleviating that concern. Moreover, they would make no claims to any part of pre-1967 Israel, nor demand the return of Palestinian refugees to Israel proper.

The idea that Jordan would be willing to take control of Palestinian territories in any capacity is preposterous. Jordan's outlook has changed significantly since the 1980s, when it still claimed the West Bank. There is an intense debate underway in Jordanian society about what it means to be Jordanian and what it means to be Palestinian. Jordanians certainly have no desire to aggravate this situation or take any steps that might make them a minority in their own country.

Regional moderates had a difficult time convincing the Arab League to approve its 2002 peace initiative. If the Israelis continue to reject it out of hand, using security concerns as an excuse to avoid even discussing the details, then they will lose a unique opportunity to make peace. Granted, the Olmert government has been more receptive to certain aspects of the initiative than was the Sharon government. But Israel cannot wait for better days, when all the stars are aligned for peace; we are living in the better days now. If we do not seize the moment, the future will most likely be bleak. ❖

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