

Alternative Diplomacy:

Inside a Grassroots Israeli-Palestinian Peace Initiative

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Brief Analysis

The identity of the state of Israel is based on two ideas: democracy and the existence of a safe home for the Jewish people. Yet, because of Israel's pressing security concerns over the past fifty-five years, the debate about how to reconcile these two ideas has never really begun. In order to bring these ideas to fruition, Israel must withdraw from the territories. It must do so not because of social, economic, or international values, but rather because the consequence of not withdrawing will be a failure to maintain its vision of a safe, democratic haven for the Jewish people. Moreover, because Israel is the only home for the Jewish people, with responsibility for protecting Jews worldwide, the Israeli government must ask itself how its policies in Judea and Samaria are affecting Jews outside of Israel.

The Roadmap advocates a very familiar and painful road. Neither side can take the first step—for the Israelis, dismantling settlements; for the Palestinians, fighting terrorism—without some kind of guaranteed reciprocation, lest it risk civil war. What Israelis and Palestinians need is a destination map, not a roadmap—one that paints a picture of a viable, two-state future. In looking to this future, Sari Nusseibeh and I are currently attempting to show our governments what the people really want by circulating a one-page joint statement of principles as part of an initiative called "The Peoples' Voice." So far, 90,000 Israelis have signed this statement, and 60,000 more are expected to show their support over the next three months.

The casualties of the last three years have caused the two parties to lose confidence in one another. A close examination of present attitudes shows that Israelis distrust Palestinians and believe that force is the only form of persuasion they understand. Yet, when asked how they view the future, most Israelis say that they are willing to live with two states divided more or less at the Green Line. Most Palestinians envision a similar future, even though they anticipate facing difficult concessions over the right of return, just as Israelis will face concessions over settlements. In other words, Israeli and Palestinian popular conceptions of a future peace settlement are closer today than they were five years ago.

Unfortunately, the fence that Israel is building will make many people stop believing in peace. If Israel creates a situation similar to that seen in apartheid-era South Africa, there will be neither a Palestinian state nor a safe home for the Jewish people. Although Israel does have the right to defend itself, the way in which it is building the wall will harm the prospects for a favorable future.

As for terrorism, it should be pointed out that during the first nine months of 2000, only one Israeli was killed by terrorists. Indeed, during those periods when the Palestinian people have been optimistic about statehood, Hamas has been quiet; the group does not act against the will of the people. Since most Palestinians are opposed to terrorism, the Palestinian Authority's security forces could fight it without being perceived as traitors to the Palestinian cause. Yet, the Palestinians will not combat terrorism until they are given a clear view of what kind of state they will get. Although Israelis believe that they have already shown them such a vision, the Palestinians cannot see past the fact that the number of settlers in the West Bank has swelled from 100,000 to 220,000 since 1993.

SARI NUSSEIBEH

The Palestinian-Israeli debate is often centered on the question of rights rather than national interests. Israel has fought war after war but has yet to secure its interests. The past ten to fifteen years of the peace process have brought each side closer to realizing exactly what its interests are. This process has also demonstrated that results can be achieved through negotiations and that a settlement based on such negotiations is what both peoples want.

Since the collapse of the second Camp David initiative, the parties have not returned to the negotiating table. In order to resuscitate negotiations, Palestinians can no longer look to the UN or the United States. In the final analysis, it will be Israel, the Palestinians' enemy, who will be their partner for peace—no one else cares enough. Palestinians seek freedom and an end to occupation, and only the Israelis can deliver these needs. With interests, rather than rights, in mind, Palestinians must convince Israel that these needs are consistent with its own interests.

In particular, the opportunity presented by the Peoples' Voice initiative must not be missed. With this statement of principles, Palestinians are being asked whether or not they are willing to live with a specific vision. By choosing to sign or not to sign, they are making a difference in their own future.

It is not unheard of for such civil society measures to influence Palestinian politics. For example, UN Security Council Resolution 242 became accepted in popular Palestinian discourse after it appeared in leaflets during the first intifada. Such a phenomenon can occur again. The goal of the Peoples' Voice initiative is not to create a new political party, but rather to incorporate the principles of the joint statement into all aspects of Palestinian society. Toward this end, petitions have been sent to the members of the Palestinian government under the title "The People's Campaign." Moreover, when the new government was formed, ads were printed in the newspapers demanding that a vision be defined. Members of the grassroots campaign have since interacted with people in numerous camps, villages, and institutions. As a result of these efforts, the Peoples' Voice initiative has generated surprisingly widespread support: 70,000 Palestinians have already signed the petition. This success seems to indicate that Palestinians need some indication that the end of the road is foreseeable.

Finally, regarding the forthcoming Geneva Accords, the details of the publicly available excerpts are, for the most part, promising. The important thing, however, is not just to sign a given agreement, but to implement the changes it outlines. If Geneva helps to push the peace process in the right direction, then it can be regarded as a substantial success, provided it is followed by grassroots efforts.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Anna Robinowitz.



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