

Gaza First: The Centrality of Gaza in Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Resolution

Written by David J. Wilcox

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DAVID J. WILCOX, OCT 31 2023

The Gaza Strip has always been central to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. The Gaza Strip has long been connected to Palestinian nationalism; many leaders of Fatah came from there; Hamas emerged there; and it is where the First Intifada (1987-1993) began (Corbin, 1999, 11-12; See also Bar-On, 1996; Waage 2004). That said, unrest in the Gaza Strip has always been connected to broader unrest across the West Bank. For example, the tensions between 4-9 December 1987 that triggered the First Intifada started in the West Bank but escalated in Gaza (Nusseibeh, 2007, 265-266). Indeed, the future of Gaza has consistently been a starting point for negotiations aimed at resolving the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (See Jensehaugen, 2018; Quandt, 2005; Waage, 2004).

While the outcome of the current confrontation between the State of Israel and Hamas is uncertain and unpredictable – indeed Israel is said not to have a plan for what will happen after – it seems clear that the *future* of the Gaza Strip will have to be examined afresh, both in terms of its political governance and invariable, its reconstruction. Indeed it has been recognised that *status quo* is now over.

In this article, I look back at the discussions that took place around the future of the Gaza Strip during the 1992-1993 Oslo Channel and draw out a number of key elements that should be considered afresh as part of a longer-term examination of what to do with the Gaza Strip following this current confrontation.

“Gaza-First”: Gaza as A Negotiation Stepping-Stone

The future of the Gaza Strip has long been a topic of debate in Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Resolution. Discussions around Palestinian autonomy – not independent statehood – beginning with the Gaza Strip began as early as 1977 and continued during the 1979 Israeli-Egyptian negotiations. Indeed the future of Gaza remained a topic of discussion throughout the 1980s (Jensehaugen, 2018; Quandt, 2005; Waage, 2004). A more substantial discussion about the future of the Gaza Strip came during 1991-1993 bilateral Washington negotiations (Mansour, 1993a; Neriah, 2022; 2019) and the subsequent 1992-1993 Oslo Channel, which eventually produced a Declaration of Principles and Mutual Recognition between the State of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and set in motion the Oslo Peace Process (See Abbas, 1995; Beilin, 1999; Corbin, 1994; Hirschfeld, 2014; Peres, 1993; Qurei, 2006; Savir, 1998).

In general Israelis were in favour of a withdrawal from the Gaza Strip (Hirschfeld, 2014; Makovsky, 1996, 115; Waage, 2004, 26) as were the Israeli Labor Party leadership by 1992-1993 (Beilin, 2004; 1999; Peres, 1995; Rabin, 1996; Neriah, 2022; see also Makovsky, 1996, 34) though not the Likud Party under Yitzhak Shamir, which wanted to retain the Gaza Strip (Miller, 2009, 71, 209; Makovsky, 1996, 86). It was well-known to the PLO that the Israelis wanted to withdraw from Gaza and that its continued occupation was generally despised (Abbas, 1995, 199-200; Qurei, 2006, 61).

Gaza held significant problems even in 1993 regarding its overpopulation, widespread poverty as well as its political and religiously conservative population while being ‘nothing less than a nightmare’ for the Israelis from a political and military viewpoint, particularly during 1987-1989 (Waage, 2004, 67). Yet unlike the West Bank (Judea and Samaria),

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Gaza had almost no importance within Jewish history and thus carried no national, religious or historic significance (Singer, 2021c, 394).

Yitzhak Rabin, Prime Minister of the State of Israel from 1992-1995, saw Gaza as the ideal location for extremism to flourish due to the economic conditions in the territory and the connected political discontent (Makovsky, 1996, 112-113). On retaining the Gaza Strip in the context of the First Intifada, Shimon Peres, Israeli Foreign Minister over the same period wrote that:

it was a mistake to attempt to suppress the violence of a minority of radical Palestinians in Gaza, whilst at the same time guarding the lives of the unarmed, peaceful majority (Peres, 1993, 20),

Furthermore, Peres argued – in words that are pertinent for the current Israel-Hamas confrontation – that:

There was no historical sense in our policing Gaza, when every Israeli soldier who defended himself against a knife-wielding or rock-throwing Palestinian was blamed in the world press for violating human rights. It was a hopeless task and no good could come of it. The Palestinians would have to run their own lives, elect their own leaders and hold weapons legally for their self-defence (Peres, 1993, 21).

In Peres's view, 'nobody wanted Gaza' neither the Egyptians nor the Palestinians from the West Bank (Peres, 1995, 322; see also Corbin, 1994, 11-12) while the Gaza Strip would 'never be Israel's salvation...' (Peres, 1995, 322). Peres felt that the Israelis 'did not have the means to save Gaza from its own grim predicaments: the overcrowding, the poverty, the refugees'. Furthermore, Peres argued that the Israelis 'had neither interest nor business running the life of the Gaza Strip or policing its squalid, teeming streets' and that Israeli occupation of it was, at the time, an 'ongoing, ghastly mistake' (Peres, 1995, 322).

From 1980, Peres saw resolving the Gaza Strip first, and then the West Bank as the appropriate approach to make progress towards resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Peres, 1993, 20; 1995, 294, 321-322; see also Qurei, 2006, 61). The Gaza-First idea was thus seen as the 'opening gambit' (Corbin, 1994, 57). For Peres, the logic was that the Gaza Strip was not as 'emotionally or politically sensitive' as the West Bank (Peres, 1993, 20).

The Palestinians had seen the Gaza-First idea previously as a 'trap' (Corbin, 1994, 47) as they felt the Israelis would not match this withdrawal with similar ones from the West Bank (Cobrin, 1994, 55-56; Heikal, 1996, 438; Makovsky, 1996, 34). As Waage highlights, "In other words, 'Gaza first' would become 'Gaza only'" (2004, 67). Peres was nevertheless aware that the Palestinians were concerned that Gaza-First could become Gaza-Only and that the Palestinians would not support the proposals if there was not a 'clear sign for continued negotiations regarding the West Bank'. Thus what had to be offered was Gaza-Plus (Peres, 1993, 22; see also 1995, 323). While the existing focus – rightly – is on Gaza, it is important that any discussion about what happens next must not solely be a discussion about Gaza but about the West Bank as well, where tensions are also rising and socio-economic conditions have deteriorated due to the current confrontation between Israel and Hamas.

International Trusteeship

In the original "Sarpsborg" document, reached between the Israelis (Dr. Yair Hirschfeld and Dr. Ron Pundak) with the PLO representatives (Ahmed Qurei, Hassan Asfour and Maher el-Kurd) March 1993, it was agreed that following the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, an International Trusteeship would be established (See Hirschfeld, 2014, 115; Lundberg, 1998; Ross, 2004, 102).

The hope was that by placing Gaza under trusteeship, would accomplish three objectives; 1) that the PLO would be able to focus on negotiating a final-status agreement with Israel rather than being absorbed by the need to govern; 2) that the Palestinian state that would eventually emerge, would have 'Western standards' and allow 'public accountability'; and 3) that Israeli, Palestinian and Egyptian security infrastructure would be institutionalized (Hirschfeld, 2014, 113).

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Hirschfeld suggestion was for a Namibia-style United Nations (UN) trusteeship (Makovsky, 1996, 31; Waage, 2004, 74). It was possible that the Gaza Strip could be placed under trusteeship with responsibility given to Egypt or the UN or a 'multinational mandate for a limited period of time'. Indeed 'the exact nature' of the trusteeship idea was 'not defined' (Waage, 2004, 72). Separately Arafat had considered UN control over Gaza (Waage, 2004, 57) and Ahmed Qurei had suggested that trusteeship could have been given to the United States, Jordan and Egypt with the United Nations overseeing (Hirschfeld, 2014, 120). Qurei clearly favoured the US and Russia's (formerly Soviet Union) involvement in trusteeship (2006, 66).

At the time, Peres, then Israeli Foreign Minister, opposed trusteeship because he saw it as a pathway solely for the emergence of an independent state, which the Israelis opposed at the time (Hirschfeld, 2014, 113). Peres argued that those around him, who had examined 'legal precedents' had outlined that international trusteeship had 'almost always established a phase in decolonization, designed to lead eventually to full independence'. Peres was not prepared to accept, at that time, the Palestinian demand for statehood when the focus was on an interim settlement (Peres, 1995, 333).

In addition, Peres was concerned that allowing the UN to be involved in the trusteeship of the Gaza Strip would set a 'precedent' for the UN to become involved in how Israel governed the West Bank as well. This also reflected long-standing opposition from Israeli governments to the involvement of the UN since the founding of the State of Israel (Waage, 2004, 74). Yet over time, Peres appears to be intrigued by the potential benefits of having Egypt and Jordan involved in trusteeship and possible other Arab states like Tunisia (Beilin, 1999, 91).

Similarly when Joel Singer joined the Oslo Channel to provide legal advice to both Peres and Rabin, he 'recommended' that the Israelis opt for Palestinian self-government in Gaza and not '[s]ome form of trusteeship for Gaza' (Peres, 1995, 334). Singer did not believe the trusteeship idea was properly defined, did not support the idea of any UN involvement and was concerned it would set a precedent for UN involvement in the West Bank (Beilin, 1999, 90; Waage, 2004, 96). Singer may well have been influenced by 'traditional Israeli distrust of UN involvement (Beilin, 1999, 90).

Finally, to Singer, UN trusteeship would be 'legally tantamount' to a Palestinian state and it had been used historically as a mechanism for decolonisation and full independence as had been seen in Namibia (Waage, 2004, 96; see also Beilin, 1999, 90). Singer argues that he was against placing the Gaza Strip under UN administration in part because he believed that Israel needed to retain 'freedom of action' in regards to security (Singer quoted in Cohen-Almagor, 2018, 751).

In the subsequent Gressheim document of July 1993, there was no reference to the trusteeship idea (Makovsky, 1996, 54-55; Waage, 2004, 101; see also Beilin, 1999, 100). Indeed it was ultimately decided that it was in the interests of both the PLO and Israel for the Gaza Strip to shift from Israeli control to PLO control (Hirschfeld, 2014; Qurei, 2006). Indeed Peres believed that the 'logical thing' was for the Israelis to 'place the responsibility for the future of Gaza in the hands of the people who lived there' and crucial 'to help raise their living standards to a respectable level' (Peres, 1995, 323). Peres hoped that PLO presence in Gaza would 'prove - to themselves and to their public - their ability to control specific situations, maintain law and order, and prevent Hamas from wreaking havoc' (Peres, 1993, 23). Indeed Hamas were, even then, a major concern for both the Israelis (Peres, 1995; 1993, 18-19; Makovsky, 1996) and the Palestinians (Hirschfeld, 1994, 105-106).

However, as Hirschfeld outlined in 2014, that the price for abandoning trusteeship for the Gaza Strip, despite the accuracy of Peres's criticism, was that it prevented: 1) the establishment of security reforms that could have made a return to the use of violence 'more difficult'; 2) undermined Palestinian state-building and the ability to counter 'corruption and waste'; 3) and prevent the focus from being on a final-status agreement (Hirschfeld, 2014, 136). Nevertheless, the idea of a 'mini' trusteeship was discussed in 2001 (Hirschfeld, 2014, 270).

In 2004, Ariel Sharon announced Israel's unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, having reoccupied it in 2002 as part of the response to the Second Intifada (2000-2005). Yet Israel retained control over the borders around and airspace above the Gaza Strip along with trade, electricity and the flow of workers in and out of the territory (Gelvin,

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2005, 245, 249; Tessler, 2009, 834). At the time of Israeli disengagement from Gaza in 2004, four scenarios were foreseen: 1) the Palestinian Authority reasserting its 'security capacities' and bringing about 'stability'; 2) a Hamas 'takeover' of the territory; 3) the emergence of a state of anarchy as the institutions collapsed; 4) shared governance between Fatah and Hamas (Hirschfeld, 2014, 300). Interestingly, trusteeship was not envisaged. Yet Singer conceded that following the Israeli unilateral withdrawal from Gaza it 'might have been a better time to put Gaza under the United Nations' (Singer quoted in Cohen-Almagor, 2018, 751). Clearly, any discussion of what happens to Gaza after the end of the current Israel-Hamas confrontation should revisit this trusteeship idea.

A Mini Marshal Plan

Among the three core ideas to emerge out of the 1992-1993 Oslo Channel, alongside Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and Israeli-Palestinian economic cooperation, was a Marshall plan for the Gaza Strip (Ross, 2004, 102; see also Aggestam, 1996, 21; Makovsky, 1996, 23). The Marshall Plan idea harked back to the post-World War II investment plan developed by the US to help address the socio-economic conditions which would provide a fertile environment for Communism. A Marshal Plan for Gaza was suggested by Ahmed Qurei early in the Oslo Channel and began one of the key elements in the Sarpsborg document (Waage, 2004, 66, 70-72, 228).

The aim of the "Mini" Marshal Plan was for large-scale financial aid and investment in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank so as to 'invigorate and expand massively' the Palestinian economy (Waage, 2004, 71-72). Peres saw the possibility that the Gaza Strip could become an important economic hub like Singapore (Peres quoted in Aderet, 2023, n.p; Beilin, 1999, 107-108; Waage, 2004, 117). The hope was to secure aid and investment from the European Community, the United States, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States as well as international institutions like the World Bank. Again it was for both Gaza and the West Bank (Beilin, 1999, 77). Clearly, such a plan would be a benefit for Gaza (and the West Bank) following this current confrontation.

What Can Be Learnt from the 1992-1993 Oslo Channel Discussions About Dealing with Gaza?

First, that should Trusteeship be discussed as a potential solution for the Gaza Strip that avoids: 1) Israeli re-occupation of the Gaza Strip; 2) prevents continued Hamas control; 3) and prepares the way for the Palestinian Authority (PA) to eventually regain control, it needs to address several issues. To begin with, the Trusteeship should be framed in such a way as to neither *prevent* nor *enable* Palestinian statehood to ensure that both the Israelis and Palestinians are prepared to accept it. It should be an *interim solution* which like the Gaza-First proposals in the 1992-1993 Oslo Channel.

However, it is clear that trusteeship could not come under the UN. The ongoing spat between Israel and the UN Secretary-General António Guterres demonstrates that the Israeli disposition towards UN leadership remains one of persistent distrust. While the trusteeship has not been explicitly discussed, Satloff, Ross and Makovsky writing for the Washington Institution, have spoken about a Palestinian-run, Post-Hamas, Interim Administration in Gaza *plus* a 'Public Safety and Law enforcement' through a 'consortium of the five Arab states who have reached peace agreements with Israel—Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco' supported by international organisations. Thus there is an *implicit* recognition that the PA is not completely able to take over running Gaza, requiring some form of *trusteeship* in practice if not in principle.

Second economic investment in the Gaza Strip is essential. The phrase used in the 1992-1993 Oslo Channel was a "mini" Marshal Plan (referencing the large-scale investment by the United States into Western Europe after the Second World War). This remains an apt description of what is needed. This should be an international-level plan in which willing states invest financially in the economic development of the Gaza Strip. To put it bluntly, states should be called to put their money where their mouth is. States with pro-Palestinian stance, pro-Israeli and those who have supported Hamas (particularly Iran). However, this will inevitably be a challenge given that there will be similar calls for support in the reconstruction of post-war Ukraine.

Finally, any political resolution (and economic plan as well) to the Gaza Strip cannot deal with Gaza *only*. That is, there has to be a connected mechanism to address the West Bank. In the 1992-1993 Oslo Channel, this was a

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connected withdrawal from Jericho in the West Bank (producing a Gaza-Plus proposal) (Abbas, 1995; Beilin, 1999; Hirschfeld, 2014; Peres, 1993; Qurei, 2006; Savir, 1998; Waage, 2004). This could include economic aid and investment in Jenin, which was a recent flashpoint for Israeli-Hamas clashes. However more important – particularly in light of the recent 30th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Principles and Mutual Recognition between Israel and the PLO which kick-started the Oslo Peace Process – there must be renewed focus on diplomatic efforts to bring about Israeli-Palestinian negotiations that can make progress on moving the conflict towards a peaceful resolution.

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