

Creating a New Road Map for Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Written by Raphael Cohen-Almagor

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RAPHAEL COHEN-ALMAGOR, DEC 26 2014

The recent round of hostilities between Israel and Hamas (July 2014) has left the prospects for peace in tatters. It also put the idea of a two-state solution in a deep freeze. At present, it is hard to see the two parties – Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) – sitting together to negotiate peace. Things, however, may change if there is a different, more peace-oriented government in Jerusalem following the March 2015 elections.

The aim of this piece is to review the different options for the future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These are: status quo, Palestinian autonomy, one-state solution, two-state solution, three-state solution, and confederations. I will argue for a piecemeal process leading to a two-state solution. Of all the options, this seems to be the most viable.

There are a few proposals on the table as to how to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict:

First Option: Decide Not to Decide: Maintaining the Status Quo

This option is the most appealing for leaderless people, for leaders who are risk-averse, who lack the ability to make bold moves towards peace. The problem, however, is that in reality there is no status quo. The status quo is interrupted time and again by both sides. It is interrupted by Israel which continues to expand its territory at the expense of the Palestinians, and it is broken time and again by Hamas and other Palestinian radical factions that are not willing to recognize Israel and its right to exist. They are intent upon destroying Israel no matter what, are willing to make significant sacrifices, and to wait for many years, even generations, to see their dream realized. With spoilers on both sides, the so-called status quo that exists more in parlance than in reality is likely to lead to another cycle of violence. It is only a matter of time before we will witness another war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, which some elements within the West Bank may also join.

Second Option: Palestinian Autonomy

Without saying this explicitly, the policy of the last Israeli government under Prime Minister Netanyahu was in line with Menachem Begin's autonomy plan of 1977. Begin did not wish to see the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. He was willing to grant the Palestinians limited administrative rights and abilities. Although Prime Minister Netanyahu voiced his commitment to two-state solution, the most recent Israeli government acted in accordance with the 1970s Likud policies. There was a clear discrepancy between the verbal commitments and the action on the ground. Netanyahu expanded the West Bank settlements and the Israeli presence in East Jerusalem. Following the 1993 Oslo Accords, the West Bank was divided into three areas: area A includes the major Palestinian cities; area B includes some 440 Palestinian villages and their surrounding lands; while area C includes all the rest, some 60% of the West Bank (The Oslo Interim Agreement; Khouri 1998; Qurie 2008; Pundak 2013). Without explicitly saying this, the Israeli government has aimed to increase its presence in area C, effectively delineating only 40% of the West Bank for the Palestinian Authority, and granting the Palestinians the ability to govern their lives in areas A and B without recognizing their national rights and aspirations. Simply put, the struggle is over land. Israel has aimed to create facts (settlements) on the ground and to expand its territory at the expense of the Palestinians. The Palestinians would not have it. For them, their big sacrifice was made in 1948 when they were left with only 22%

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of the historic Palestine. To give up 60% of the 22% is a difficult pill to swallow. Israeli facts on the Palestinian land of the West Bank could be sustained either through consented solution, agreed by both sides, or through violence. As it is hard to envisage Palestinian consent to this sacrifice without ample compensation, this reality of Israeli expansion is likely to yield more violence and blood.

Third Option: One-State Solution

This solution means that Israel and Palestine will become one unit. This solution has three variants. All three variants aim to put an end to the Jewish state. All three variants aim to eliminate the Zionist enterprise:

1. Palestinian: the creation of one Palestine at the expense of Israel. Both parties will agree to the creation of one state under Palestinian symbols. It is unlikely that Israel will agree to this.
2. Post-Zionist: also known as “the State-of-all-its-citizens solution”. Israel will annex all territories under its control. All Palestinians will become Israeli citizens, with full citizenship rights. With time, Jews will become a minority in Israel as the birth rate among Arabs exceeds that of the Jews. It will be the end of Zionism (Azoulay and Ophir 2012). Israel would forego its clear Jewish identity as the home for all Jewish people. Only a small minority of Israeli-Jews are willing to accept such a vision for Israel.
3. The Iranian/Hamas solution: bringing the end of Israel by force. Conquering Israel and re-establishing the historic Palestine, before the Zionist revolution and the Israeli victories over the Arabs (see The Charter of the Hamas). Many Israelis are afraid of this solution. This is why so much emphasis in Israeli politics is put on security. This is why security considerations today are far more important in the eyes of most Israelis than prospects for peace. Deep suspicions and fears of the other lead Israelis to see peace and security as competing concepts rather than supplementing concepts.

Fourth Option: Solutions that Are Aimed to Get Rid of Palestine or to Undermine Its Cause for an Independent State

These solutions are proposed by Israelis on the right of the political camp. Commonly, there are two lines of arguments:

1. The Palestinian state already exists. The Palestinians should aspire to create a home for themselves in Jordan, not in the West Bank or in Gaza. They should immigrate to Jordan and seize the reign of power there (Tauber 2013). The Hashemite Kingdom is not keen on this proposed solution.
2. People who oppose the two-state solution ask rhetorically: why do you speak of a two-state and not a three-state solution? Hamas and Fatah are rivals, not friends. Fatah is not welcomed in Gaza. Its people were brutally murdered when Hamas took over following the 2006 elections. Thus, in reality, there is a major rift between the two parties, despite their unity government (Nisan 2012). People who propose this solution know that this is not what the Palestinian aspire to, and that three-state solution cannot be a viable option. They raise this option only to discredit the two-state solution.

Fifth Option: Confederations

There are several options:

1. With Jordan (West Bank)
2. With Egypt (Gaza and the West Bank)
3. With Israel, Egypt, and Jordan (The New Middle East) (Morris 2009; *Eiland* 2010)

In terms of viability, there is no doubt that some form of confederation will better serve the Palestinian interest. However, at present, this is a far-fetched proposal. Jordan, Egypt, and Israel do not rush to establish such a confederation. This option can become realistic only when there is peace, trust, and good will of all concerned nations. These three ingredients – peace, trust, and good will – are scarce at present.

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Sixth Option: Two-State Solution

This is the most just solution. I have been campaigning for a two-state solution since 2012, and explained the reasons why this solution is fair and just in a number of articles which the reader is welcome to read (Cohen-Almagor 2012, 2014a, 2014b). I do not wish to repeat the reasoning here. I believe that peace is a precious commodity and therefore it requires both parties to pay a high price for its achievement, reaching a solution that is agreeable to both. The peace deal should be attractive to both Israel and Palestine, equally. It cannot be one-sided, enforced, or coerced. Of all the possible solutions presently on the table, a two-state solution is the only viable, long-term solution from which both sides can profit. While the strategy is to reach that solution, the tactics for reaching it need to address present realities and new complexities that are the result of the latest round of hostilities between Israel and Hamas.

At present, it is impossible to see the two rivals sitting together and reaching a comprehensive agreement that will settle all disputes and declare an end to hostilities. There is too much hostility, suspicion, and bad blood between the two parties. The tactics recognize that trust and good will between Israel and the Palestinian Authority are much-needed commodities and leave much to be desired. Thus, what is needed is a series of steps to build trust and good will that will pave the way to the negotiation table.

The two major obstacles to peace are the build-up of settlements by Israel, and Palestinian terrorism. These two issues were not adequately tackled in any previous negotiations. The result is the present mess of continued violence. Until these issues are comprehensively addressed, the peace wagon will remain stuck and unmoved.

Israel and the Palestinian Authority are either unwilling or unable to stop settlement growth and continued acts of terror and violence. Thus, what is required is the involvement of third parties in the conflict. Third parties should shoulder efforts to tackle these issues, closely coordinating their constructive trust-building steps. The third parties should include the United States and the Arab League [1]. The Palestinian Authority is too weak and too fragile to address the conflict successfully with its very modest means. The PA needs the assistance, legitimacy, and capabilities of a greater power that has some vested interest in resolving the conflict. Until now, the US was unable to deliver the goods on its own. The Arab League cannot carry the burden alone. But coordinated efforts of the USA and the Arab League to build trust by addressing the major hurdles may prove successful, leading Israel and the PA to a better, positive future.

In an atmosphere that is not derailed by either settlement buildup or by terror, further constructive steps can be made. Granted, there will be spoilers on both sides. There will be settlers who will try to create facts on the ground, and there will be terrorists who will continue in their attempts to throw both parties into another round of violence. The important thing is a firm stand by both Israel and the PA against such spoilers. Explicit and unequivocal condemnation and firm actions against spoilers is needed. No shred of legitimacy should be conferred on them, making a clear and loud voice that both Israel and PA are now intent on embarking upon a renewed journey towards peace. With this frame of mind, with resolute commitment to pave a new horizon for their respective people, it will be possible to make further steps that will provide a momentum for peace. These steps may include agreements on allocation of water resources (Aliewi et al 2011; Shuval 2011), on fishing in their respective territorial waters; slow but steady release of prisoners; evacuation of isolated Israeli settlements; and the introduction of significant changes in the Israeli and Palestinian education curriculum; emphasizing good neighborhood, pluralism, and diversity; acknowledging the differences of culture and religion, with utmost respect for the tradition of each other and with the view that these traditions can be levers for tranquil co-existence (Aweiss 2011; Bar-Tal 2011). In every age group, vital concepts for understanding the other will be studied. This program is critical for establishing peaceful relationships and trust between the two parties [2].

Conclusion

To resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there is a need for courageous leaders on both sides who seize the opportunities presented to them and make the most for their peoples.

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To create peace, it is essential to have trust, good will, and security. It would be far-fetched at present to hope for peace in the short term. We should have little illusions about a fast-track leading to a comprehensive peace. The road to peace is long, protracted, and most complicated. What is required is to build trust; to consolidate economic conditions for Palestinians; to bolster security on both sides; to stop enlarging existing settlements; to dismantle checkpoints to make the lives of Palestinian civilians easier; to involve international community in the trust-building process. The road is long and trying, but the potential reward is worthy of all efforts.

Notes

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[1] See the Arab Peace Initiative 2002.

[2] For further discussion, see Rothman 1992.

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Creating a New Road Map for Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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