

THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

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Beyond Gaza

Israeli and Palestinian leaders are either incapable or unwilling to think strategically about ways they can resolve, or at least effectively manage, the many issues that have divided their people for more than sixty years.

SHORT OF COMPLETE ANNIHILATION OF HAMAS and thousands of civilians in the process, Israel's 'Operation Cast Lead' in Gaza will not have achieved strategic outcomes that go beyond a breakable ceasefire. Israel's goal of restoring deterrence by punishment will not last very long, as Hamas will find a way to eventually re-arm and re-engage in the same destructive behavior against Israel. At the same time, Hamas leaders will not be able to explain to Palestinians how shelling Israeli towns with rockets and terrorising Israeli society will better their lives and advance the cause for statehood. Negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians based on the 1967 boundaries seem almost futile today. What might have been achieved at Camp David in 2000, at Taba the following year, or in Geneva in 2003, is highly unlikely now.

There is little reason to believe that Israeli leaders will now accept, rightly or wrongly, going back to the 1967 borders where Israel's cities would be connected by a corridor nine miles wide, leaving population centres exposed and within mortar range of adversaries. It is equally



difficult to imagine how Palestinians, as weak and divided as they are, will ever be able to change the balance of power in their favour and achieve their aims.

The issue is no longer about recognition, territory, and past or future United Nations resolutions. There is a new reality in that part of the world, which cannot be ignored: Gaza is now a challenge, not an asset, to Palestinian statehood. Israel cannot achieve peace or long-term stability by turning Gaza into even more of a defeated, hopeless Palestinian prison camp. Meanwhile, Palestinians cannot move one inch forward in their struggle for statehood without uniting or at least tempering their internal differences.

A REAL STATE

In an environment where Palestinian division runs deep and where Israeli coalition politics are inherently unstable, how can real breakthroughs on the peace front ever be achieved? There is no easy answer, but here are a few steps that can help set the stage for peace.

Israel needs to start developing a strategy that looks beyond today's crises and the next election. Israeli leaders will have to accept that security is one thing, but that its current occupying presence on the West Bank does nothing more than provoke Palestinian and Arab anger and make peace impossible.

Separation may be necessary, but it cannot work unless it is tied to a clear vision of a Palestine that can function as a state, that has proper infrastructure and lines of communication; to Israeli actions and incentives that support such a state; and to Israeli efforts to reach out to all moderate Arab and Islamic regimes – just as it has to Egypt and Jordan. There is no real hope for a pragmatic and meaningful peace settlement as long as Israel is an occupying power, fixated on perfect security.

For Palestinians, the future lies in creating a different kind of Road Map that focuses on producing a real economic future. The new dynamics centre on economics, demographics, and sovereignty.

Palestinians need a new vision, based on intelligent self-interest. It is far from clear that the Palestinian Authority can survive its own mistakes, corruption, incompetence and destructive Israeli actions. It is possible that younger – and more honest – secular Palestinians may supplement or replace the failed leaders. The Authority needs to show that it can use outside aid effectively as it now receives close to \$1 billion in aid a year and another \$1 billion in revenue. Something like three quarters of that money goes to salaries and pensions – often for people who do not work or exist.

But regardless of how well the Authority uses its funds, demographics and economics will enforce another reality. The Palestinian right of return will never take more than token form in Israel. Equally important, every Palestinian who returns to Gaza and the West Bank, who is not a source of major skills and capital, will be a serious liability in a territory that faces a decade-long demographic nightmare.

The future of Palestinian refugees lies either in full citizenship in some of the countries where they now live, or in relocating them to areas that can absorb them far better than Gaza and the West Bank.

Arabs have a responsibility to help Palestinians too. Far too many Arab rulers have used the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a lightning rod to excuse their own failures and a pointless level of militarism. Moreover, most Arab nations need to understand that it is Islamist extremists, rather than they, who are capitalising on the lack of a grand strategic Arab vision.

PEACE DIPLOMACY

When peace diplomacy is resurrected – as it must be because none of the parties has a viable alternative – the American contribution will depend on its ability to insist on a strategic and political concept for the enterprise, something along the lines of the Arab Peace initiative of 2002, as imperfect as it is. Mediating between the parties without a clear sense of the destination would lead to a repetition of past failures.

The American-led diplomatic effort should concentrate on a series of meaningful interim agreements, unlike those of the past which create spoiler opportunities. Their purpose should be not as a final peace but as an extended period of coexistence, reflecting what is imposed on the parties by reality: that they share the same small territory which both consider sacred and that neither is in a position to impose its will on the other by force. Process for the sake of process, as seen in the past, is a recipe for disaster, since it gives more time for Al Qaeda and other extremist elements to fester in the Territories.

Interim agreements cannot but defer the issues of the right of return of refugees and holy places and focus on more urgent ones that relate to the Palestinians' ability to lead a life of dignity within an economically viable entity. Palestinian territory should be largely linked and Israeli checkpoints and interference with daily life in that territory should be terminated, or at least sharply curtailed.

As part of the interim agreements, the de facto arrangements for governing Jerusalem could be reviewed in an attempt to give the Arab population a greater role without, however, seeking to settle the sovereignty issue.

This all begs the question of what to do about Hamas. Only the Palestinians can tame Hamas and convince the Islamist organisation to moderate its maximalist ambitions. Hamas needs to be brought back into the political process, perhaps under a refined version of the deal made in Mecca early last year.

But Israel has a huge responsibility too: it has to accept a modicum of imperfect security until the dividends of a negotiated settlement shift the spoiler's advantage away from an angry and radical Hamas to a majority of excitedly hopeful Palestinian people, who will in turn find Hamas the obstacle to their statehood, as opposed to the means of achieving it.