



Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

Multilateral Imposition: An Immodest Proposal for the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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Which is more likely in the next five years: that the Israelis and Palestinians negotiate a peace agreement or that they continue a “status quo” that turns into an accidental suicide pact? The safe bet is suicide.

The Israeli-Palestinian negotiations at Taba in early 2001 provided the clearest vision of a possible solution, and ever since this near miss the Israelis and the Palestinians have returned to their co-dependent patterns of mutual destruction. The Israeli election of Ariel Sharon in January 2001 was both a symptom and a cause of the Israeli population’s disillusionment with the peace process. Although American president George Bush announced his country’s desire for a two-state solution, any interest he had in pushing the parties in that direction through negotiation was completely overwhelmed by his effort to redraw the map of the Middle East through force. Israel unilaterally withdrew from Gaza in September 2005, and Hamas now had a more stable base from which to attack Israeli positions and cities. In early 2006 Hamas won the Palestinian elections against a corrupt and unpopular Fatah. Its election “ended” a peace process that had not gone anywhere in years as Israel refused to negotiate with this terrorist organization, and Hamas and Fatah have traded off between unity talks and civil war. In mid-2006 and after Hamas and Hizbullah kidnapped several Israeli soldiers, Israel attacked Hizbullah positions in Lebanon, leading to an impressive display of rocket fire from Hizbullah that brought northern Israel to a standstill and Israel’s deadly assault on Beirut. Israel has little interest in re-occupying Gaza, but it still can and will make life a living hell for its residents, as vividly demonstrated in January 2009. Although Israeli officials have generally accepted the need for a two-state solution, Israel keeps building settlements and “facts on the ground” that cause Palestinians to question Israel’s sincerity. Throughout these events Israeli and Palestinian populations express a steady support for a two-state solution, but frustration is driving them to new forms of extremism and chauvism. The irony is that it has become more acceptable to talk openly about a two-state solution at the very moment it has become increasingly improbable.

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Future Trends, Vicious Cycles

Over the last eight years the international community has played the roles of frustrated friend of peace and enabler of violence. The Quartet of the U.S., Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations proposed a “road map” in 2002 that declared a goal of ending the conflict by 2005, and ever since it has spent most of its time trying to get Israeli and Palestinian leaders to identify which version of the road map they accept. Consumed by its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bush administration practiced drive-by diplomacy for the first seven years and supported Israel in their common campaign against terrorism. In his last year in office President Bush pledged to deliver a peace treaty by the end of 2008 and, predictably, the U.S., Israel, and the Palestinian Authority spent most of their time talking about the process of negotiations rather than the final status issues of Jerusalem, the settlements, and the right of return. The Obama administration is now confronting the Israelis over the settlements, and even if it succeeds in getting a freeze it is not clear what this means for the broader peace process. Success in the Israeli-Palestinian theatre is defined as no war, tactical agreements, and a willingness to continue negotiations.

Is there an alternative to negotiations? Many Israelis speak of the acceptability of the “status quo” in the absence of Palestinian leadership that can and wants to make the necessary compromises for peace. What, exactly, is the status quo? Hamas continues to rule Gaza and Israel continues to try and limit Hamas attacks through a combination of deterrence, regularly attacking Hamas’s capabilities, and getting Egypt to keep closed the tunnels that go from the Sinai into Gaza that Hamas uses to smuggle weapons. Nor is the situation on the West Bank intolerable. Israel might not be able to build settlements as it sees fit, but it is not being pressured to dismantle them, either. The security situation remains reasonably stable, owing to a combination of the Palestinian Authority’s determination not to let the West Bank go the way of Gaza; U.S. training of Palestinian police and security forces that have helped to calm once deadly cities like Jenin; and Israel’s establishment of a “security fence” and ribbons of access roads that have separated the Israelis and the Palestinians. As much as Israel would like a deal with Syria, it can live without one. And for all the negative press Israel received from home and abroad regarding its campaign in Lebanon in 2006, its northern border has been relatively quiet and the United Nations peacekeeping force has even shown occasional resolve in the face of Hizbullah’s continued accumulation of rockets. If peace is not possible, which is the view of many Israelis, then the status quo is tolerable.

Yet the status quo is a short-term fix and long-term trends are likely to produce cycles of more ominous and lethal violence, and conclude a century’s struggle by Jews and Palestinians for a national homeland with a destruction of their national identity. Among the many trends, four stand out. First and foremost is demography. Although different sources offer different projections, the likelihood is that within fifteen years non-Jews will outnumber Jews in Israel and the occupied territories. At that point Jewish Israelis having to decide whether the State’s democratic or Jewish identity is most important to them. In other words, Israel cannot remain Jewish and democratic: if it is to remain Jewish then the Jews will have to rule as a minority; if it is to be democratic then Israel’s Jewish identity will slowly disappear. All of this is well known to the parties. It was a factor pushing Yitzhak Rabin and Ariel Sharon toward a two-state solution, creating a sense of urgency among many Israelis who worry that they will soon lose their democratic, Jewish state. It is shaping the bargaining strategy of the Palestinians, creating a belief that time is on their side. Once they get near majority status, the Palestinians can shift strategies from negotiating for peace to demanding citizenship, forcing the Israelis to choose between becoming a minority in a new, unified state or giving the Palestinians everything that the Israelis refuse to give them today. As Saeb Erakat, the chief Palestinian negotiator recently quipped, “In ten years the Israelis will be begging us for the kind of deal that they refuse to offer us today.”

Second is the United States’ continued, nearly unquestioned, support of Israel. Over the years the American position has moved closer to the original Palestinian position than Israel’s, and while the United States is not necessarily a friend of the Palestinians, it has become significantly sympathetic to the Palestinian national cause. If Israel moves further and further toward the political right it will find itself increasingly at odds with American

views. And, Israel is not the only country experiencing a demographic shift—so, too, is the United States. Israel has benefited from a United States whose political ranks are drawn from the descendants of Europeans and who retain memories (and some guilt) about the Holocaust. But the Holocaust is a fading memory and the American population is decreasingly Caucasian and increasingly drawn from immigrants and their children from Latin America, South Asia, and Asia—populations that have no strong cultural ties to the Jews or any reason to feel emotionally connected to the Holocaust. For them Israel has always been an occupier. And, given trends in American Jewish public opinion, it is not clear that an increasingly religious and right-wing Israel will stir the passions of American Jews. Israel, in short, is in danger of losing its last protector.

Third, the Palestinian population is likely to become even more radicalized and prone toward using violence in their internal struggles and their fight for independence. Three decades ago the Palestinian national movement was quintessentially secular, a home not only to Muslims and Christians but also to socialist firebrands who had no sympathy for religious orthodoxy. Today the single most important political force is Hamas, an Islamic organization, and while many Palestinians support Hamas not because of its religious agenda but rather because of Fatah's crooked and incompetent leadership, there is no reason to predict that current circumstances will produce a burst of secularization. Perhaps the Palestinians will be able to find some sort of unity, once again, but there are more reasons to predict greater fragmentation. And, it will be difficult to imagine how Palestinian institutions will reverse this trend, or minimally govern, given that they have been completely hollowed out by acts of destruction by Israel and self-destruction by the Palestinian rivalries. Hamas and other groups committed to the use of violence will undoubtedly acquire rockets with a greater range, bringing Tel-Aviv into its sights, and Israel will be able to maintain control in the West Bank only at a growing human, political, economic, and moral cost.

Lastly, the Israeli population is likely to become more chauvinistic and hawkish. Whether accurate or not, the perception among Israelis is that the Palestinians are largely to blame for failing to work with what was available, leading to the Israeli population's demoralization with the peace process and the disappearance of the Israeli Left. In a recent trip to Israel I was deeply impressed by how, in contrast to a decade ago, Israelis from across the political spectrum exhibit little sympathy for the Palestinians. The attitude seems to be either that the Palestinians had their chance or it is clear that they will not be satisfied until Israel no longer exists as a Jewish state. While sympathy is not necessary for peace, its absence implies that Israelis will feel less restrained when attacked. Indeed, some Israelis seem to be hoping for a region-wide attack that ostensibly provides the pretext for ethnically cleansing the Palestinians from the West Bank. If current trends continue, and assuming that nothing else happens that inflames the situation (and in the Middle East surprises are rarely good), then in a decade: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will have entered into a more dangerous chapter; everyone will be reflecting on the current moment as the last, best

chance for a negotiated two-state solution; and these nationalist movements will have lost their original identity.

It is the recognition of the current conditions and future trends that have led many, including myself, to entertain an imposed peace. I have imagined an American president telling the Israelis and the Palestinians that they must accept something resembling Taba—or else. Historically speaking, imposed solutions tend to last as long as the conditions are imposed, but the Israeli-Palestinian case might be different because Taba was their creation; that is, the “imposed” peace is generally consistent with their preferences. Moreover, Israelis and Palestinians alike recognize that their leaders are worried about the political futures, and need the political cover of outside pressure. I continue to believe that an imposed peace is a possibility, but have since backtracked from two of its necessary conditions. I am not convinced that either or both of the parties will accept the conditions outlined at Taba, or certainly not as “easily” as they might have eight years ago. If so, then the Americans (and others) have to be willing to follow through on their threats, and it is difficult to imagine an American president delivering on the kinds of threats that would make the Israelis capitulate. And, if the United States did, I can just as easily imagine the Israelis deciding to expel the Palestinians, figuring that the costs of confronting the U.S. will be roughly the same whether they reject the American demand or “cleanse” the territories.

Multilateral Imposition

Assuming that neither bilateral negotiations nor international imposition are viable, is there an alternative to this road to mutual destruction? One plausible option is what can be called “multilateral imposition.” This option begins with Israel announcing that it believes that Taba, with some slight adjustments, represents a just solution to the conflict, but because it has no partner for peace it will carry out the terms on its own. The broad terms would be as follows. Over the next eighteen months it will withdraw from 97% of the West Bank (compensating the Palestinians with the other 3% from Israeli territory adjacent to the West Bank). It accepts the “right of return” to the new Palestinian state while agreeing to allow some Palestinians and their immediate families from the original exodus to return to Israel as a humanitarian gesture. It also announces the desire to create an international commission of eminent personalities to explore the internationalization of Jerusalem. In effect, the “international community” becomes Israel's de facto negotiating partner and the responsible occupying authority in the territories.

There is nothing to stop Israel from implementing what it believes is a reasonable end to the conflict, but the possibility of success improves dramatically if done with support from the international community and in conjunction with a muscular, multisided, multitiered, multilateral coalition. Unilateralism, in Israel's eyes, has been proven a chimera because of its experiences as a consequence of the withdrawal from southern Lebanon and Gaza. Yet one reason why Israel's withdrawal failed to bring security and stability is because Israel did not work with any other parties, including the Palestinians, the Lebanese, and the United Nations, allowing radical elements to step into the

vacuum created by the departing Israelis. By working closely with international parties Israel can mitigate the prospects of a repeat event.

The United States would be responsible for generating support for Israel's withdrawal from the United Nations Security Council, Russia, the European Union, and the Arab states. The United Nations Security Council has an important role to play in both legitimating Israel's withdrawal and authorizing the required international force to replace the departing Israelis. Although it is important that the UN deputize any international force, the force need not be commanded or staffed by "blue helmets" and instead could include troops from NATO and other battle-tested states. Importantly, the international force would have the authority to use "all necessary means" to keep the peace and disarm illegal military organizations—and it must be willing to use that authority.

The prospects for stability and peace also are contingent on Arab support. The United States can frame the Israeli withdrawal as generally consistent with the Arab Initiative of 2002, impressing upon the Arab states that they should recognize Israel's right to exist, establish diplomatic ties, allow for economic exchanges, and work toward the normalization of relations. The Arab states, moreover, will be central for providing the kind of political cover the Palestinian government will need to tacitly recognize the Israeli withdrawal as a tangible and important step toward creating a viable Palestinian state and ending the conflict.

Israel's withdrawal will certainly increase the prospects of violence from those Israeli and Palestinian groups that oppose a two-state solution—the Jewish settlers and Hamas and its like-minded accomplices. An on-going fear among many Israelis is that Israel's forcible removal of settlers will trigger a civil war. It is possible. But removing the settlements will get harder and the prospects of civil war will increase as time goes on, so the Israeli government is better off having this encounter now, not later. Moreover, public opinion polls suggest that Israelis do not have a tremendous amount of love for the settlers, and if given the choice between the possibility of peace or Greater Israel they will choose the former over the latter. The IDF must have sole responsibility for removing the Jewish settlers; international forces cannot and should not be involved.

Palestinian extremists also can be expected to engage in acts of violence against Israel and any Palestinian leadership that does not actively oppose Israel's plans. Hamas and others can be expected to prove, through a show of violence, that they forced Israel's retreat. Israel can and must undertake various actions to minimize the number of attacks and their psychological impact. Israeli leaders should prepare its society for the expected episodes of violence. Israel can and must respond to attacks from Hamas. Israel also must work closely with Egypt and Jordan, two front-line states that are equally opposed to Hamas and the radicalization of the region. Egypt should be strongly encouraged to close the tunnels from the Sinai into Gaza—and keep them closed. Jordan can be expected to coordinate with Israeli and international forces to ensure that the long border between Israel and

Palestine does not become a gateway for weapons smuggling. As Israel withdraws it will hand off military authority to international forces, who will then be responsible for security. The NATO-led force, working in concert with the U.S. and others, would accelerate the process of training the Palestinian security and police.

Although it is not critical that the Palestinian leadership tacitly or even explicitly agree to the terms of Israel's withdrawal, certainly the prospects of success improve dramatically if it did. To begin, there is evidence that Taba is generally consistent with Palestinian public opinion, and those aspects that are difficult to swallow, including a right to return, might be acceptable if undertaken in conjunction with other positive action. Second, Israel, the Arab states, and the international community can strengthen Fatah and other moderate elements among the Palestinians. Hamas will rightly take the withdrawal as a direct challenge to its authority and political viability. There are two ways to deal with Hamas. As should be the strategy when dealing with all spoilers, it is important to remove the issues that they use to generate public support; the terms of Israel's withdrawal and the prospects of a state is likely to turn more pragmatically-minded Palestinians in favor of peaceful change. Also, Hamas must be recognized by Israel and the broader international community as a legitimate actor, fit for discussions and political coalitions. In short, Hamas must be given an incentive to join with, or at least not actively oppose, these new developments. Meanwhile, Israel and the international community could provide political, financial, and strategic support to moderate Palestinian elements, thus attending to Fatah's immediate self-interest in survival and improving the chances that a more status quo-oriented Palestinian leadership will remain in power.

As soon as Israeli announces its withdrawal the United Nations, alongside other expert bodies, must begin the long and arduous process of preparing the Palestinian authority for independence. The United Nations' track record regarding peacebuilding is not sterling, but it has outperformed other international actors. Stated more positively, when given the proper tools, resources, political support, and time, the UN has been reasonably successful. In the meantime, the United Nations could recognize Palestine as a sovereign state and it could begin acting as such on the international stage.

Conclusion

Would Israel initiate such a scenario? In many respects, it already has. Prime Ministers Ehud Barak and Ehud Olmert are reported to have accepted, in principle, these terms for a deal, and many lament the passing of Ariel Sharon precisely because he seemed to be prepared to make these historic compromises and had the necessary respect from the Israeli political and military establishment. The scenario also presumes that Israel is willing to rely on international forces for its security, which is supposedly an unthinkable option. Yet Israel already does. An international force has been stationed in Hebron for nearly ten years. Quiet borders depend on having neighbors that are ready to ferret out violent elements. Israel's frustration with Egypt and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) is that they are not

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aggressive enough—and there is no evidence that Israel would do a better job at an acceptable cost. It was always assumed that the United Nations and other international bodies would be involved in the process of building Palestinian institutions. In short, this scenario is consistent with most expectations of what it will take to implement a settlement that looks fairly close to what the parties discussed at Taba.

No plan is guaranteed to work and even the best laid plans can fail because of unexpected events. In short, there will always be risks for peace and this option of multilateral imposition is no exception. Yet the risks of this or any other proposal must be weighed against the very real risks associated with the status quo. We now know the general outlines of a reasonably just settlement. We now know that the longer the parties wait the more complicated and complex the situation becomes. We now know that Israel is facing a demographic challenge and cannot remain both democratic and Jewish. We know that Palestinian population is becoming increasingly radicalized and the Palestinian areas virtually ungovernable. We know that it has become increasingly difficult for the parties to find the right recipe, if one can be found, for a process that might lead to peace. The process is slowly killing the Israelis and the Palestinians. The status quo is a euphemism for continued bloodshed and the end of the idea of Zionism and Palestinian nationalism.

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