The Future of the Two-State Solution

Maj.-Gen. (res.) Giora Eiland

Former Chairman, National Security Council

- While the outlines of a two-state solution are generally known, the maximum that any government of Israel will be ready to offer the Palestinians and still survive politically is much less than the minimum that any Palestinian leader can accept. The real gap between both sides is much greater than what is perceived, and that gap is growing.
- The level of trust between both sides has changed. There are fewer Israelis who believe that the real intention of the Palestinians is to have only a small Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. Furthermore, there is less trust in the Palestinians' abilities to keep their commitments, even if they undertake the right commitments.
- In Gaza today there is, for all practical purposes, an independent state led by Hamas. It is not part of the Palestinian Authority because that is what the Palestinians decided. If there is an accountable state in Gaza, although it is an enemy state, Israel has a degree of deterrence because there is another party that has something to lose. Current Israeli policy claims that Israel's goal is to bring about the collapse of the Hamas government in Gaza, but that is not going to happen.
- If we make Gaza double or triple its current size by adding an additional 600 sq. km. of territory from Egyptian Sinai, this could give Gaza the space it needs. Suddenly Gaza would have the space to build a new city of a million people, along with a real seaport and airport, and to create the conditions that would make economic expansion possible.
- At the same time, Israel needs 600 sq. km. in the West Bank because the 1967 line is unacceptable from a security point of view. In return, Israel could give to Egypt 600 sq. km. in the Negev in southern Israel. At the end of the day no one loses land, while multilateral swaps enable us to solve the currently intractable problem of Gaza and solve Israeli needs in the West Bank.
- Egypt can gain significant benefits from this arrangement. The new seaport and airport next to Egypt can become major economic connections between the Gulf and Europe. Furthermore, Egypt could get a land corridor to enable movement from Egypt to the rest of the Middle East without the need to cross Israel.

The Gaps Are Growing

When we talk about the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we see a paradox. On one hand, there is a real need to solve this conflict. Yet while the outlines of a two-state solution are generally known, the maximum that any government of Israel will be ready to offer the Palestinians and still survive politically is much less than the minimum that any Palestinian leader can accept. In other words, the real gap between both sides is much greater than what is perceived, and that gap is growing rather than becoming smaller. While everyone expresses their commitment to the two-state solution because it has become politically correct to do so, this doesn't mean that the political leadership can reach any such agreement since the political risks they face are far greater than the prospects of success. They are not motivated to take such huge risks when the probability of success is so low.

Indeed, in the eight years since the failure of the Clinton-sponsored talks at Camp David, most of the variables have changed for the worse. First of all, eight years ago we had three leaders who could deliver. President Clinton was deeply involved in this process; he knew the details and invested all his political influence. I'm not sure there will be any other American president in the future who will be ready to exert so much effort on this specific issue.

The Israeli leader at that time, Ehud Barak, enjoyed the support of Israeli public opinion in the summer of 2000, a short time after Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon. He was perceived to be a leader who could make hard decisions and could implement them. Yasser Arafat, no matter what many Israelis think about his character, at least was perceived by the Palestinians as their real national leader, someone who could speak in the name of all Palestinians. Since then, there has been no Palestinian leader like him and I cannot foresee anyone else achieving his status in the foreseeable future.

Second, the level of trust between both sides also has changed. There are fewer and fewer Israelis who believe that the real intention of the Palestinians is to have only a small Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. There is a stronger Israeli fear that this is not the ultimate desire of the Palestinians. Furthermore, there is less trust in the Palestinians' abilities to keep their commitments, even if they undertake the right commitments.

Third, there is the rise of Hamas. Eight years ago, Hamas was in the opposition and no one could really challenge the Palestinian Authority. Today Hamas is strong enough to do so, and if it is not the main force in Palestinian society, Hamas is strong enough to undermine every political process.

If a solution between the Israelis and the Palestinians could not be achieved eight years ago when most of the circumstances were much better, on what basis can we believe that today we can take the very same solution and suddenly be more successful? I think it is a big illusion that something like this can happen, at least in the foreseeable future.

Possible Modifications to the Conventional Solution

So what can be done? There are basically two different approaches. One says a solution is not going to be achieved in the near future, so rather than try to solve the problem, let's try to manage the conflict and try to improve whatever can be improved and hope that someday the situation will be better.

The second approach is to explore other possibilities or modifications to the conventional two-state solution. According to the conventional solution, at the end of the day there will be two states: Israel and a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, with borders very similar to the 1967 lines.

This solution suffers from major obstacles that prevent us from moving forward. One is the problem of Israeli security, and another is the territorial problem, or the lack of territory that can be sufficient for all sides.

Israel's Need for Defensible Borders

It is part of the common international approach that Israel should return to the 1967 borders. But before 1967, Jordan and Egypt were responsible for the West Bank and Gaza, respectively. Israel was small and its borders were not very defensible. Now, according to the two-state solution, suddenly an additional Arab state - a Palestinian state - has to be established, which is a different situation than what existed before 1967.

First of all, this future Arab state of Palestine is probably going to be very weak, very fragile, and very dependent. So we are told it is Israel's task to make sure this future Palestinian state is viable, strong, and satisfied, because if the people there are not satisfied, then it will backfire. And because this state is divided between Gaza and the West Bank, to make it a viable state, Israel is expected to agree to a land connection between the two areas.

Unfortunately, there is a state in between - Israel - that is going to be interrupted by this need of the Palestinians for free movement between the two parts of the future state. So from many points of view, Israel is expected to return to a situation that is much worse than what existed before 1967.

The Politically Incorrect Jordanian Option

Today, it is well understood that if Israel were to withdraw completely from the West Bank, then in a short time, perhaps a few months, Hamas would take control, just as it

controls Gaza. A Palestinian state controlled by Hamas in the West Bank would create a security situation which is completely unbearable for Israel.

At the same time, many moderate Palestinians in the West Bank are beginning to support greater Jordanian involvement there, and even talk in terms of Jordanian control of the West Bank. If those secular, moderate Palestinians have to decide between Hamas or Jordan, many prefer Jordan. Many also believe that the two-state solution - of a Palestinian state alongside Israel - is not going to be achieved. So to end the Israeli occupation, perhaps the only way is to create a new political situation in which the West Bank becomes part of Jordan. This is something that Israel would be much more willing to consider when compared to a Palestinian state that is not going to be reliable. Of course, the idea of Jordanian control is not politically correct, so no one is prepared to say it officially, but in private talks many say it.

From the Jordanian point of view the same concern exists. The Jordanians understand very well that if there is a Palestinian state in the West Bank, this state would be controlled by Hamas. The Jordanians are concerned about a Palestinian state that shares a common border with Jordan, where the majority of the population is Palestinian and the Muslim Brotherhood is a rising force. This is a formula that would threaten the Jordanian regime.

Solving the Problem of Gaza

Building two viable states in the narrow strip of territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea is probably not possible because there is too little land and too many other problems, such as the situation in Gaza.

The Gaza Strip contains 1.5 million people in an area of 360 sq. km., a population which is expected to grow to 2.4 million people by 2020. Does anyone really believe that those Palestinians will be so happy in Gaza that they will focus all of their attention on their own well-being and in developing their economy, and will live peacefully alongside Israel? If Israel signed a peace agreement with the Palestinians today, would this give the people in Gaza the minimum that is needed for viable economic life?

In Gaza today there is, for all practical purposes, an independent state led by Hamas. It is not part of the Palestinian Authority because that is what the Palestinians decided. If there is an accountable state in Gaza, although it is an enemy state, there is an address - an address for a cease-fire - and Israel can retaliate whenever something goes wrong. Israel has a degree of deterrence because there is another party that has something to lose. The current Israeli policy claims that Israel's goal is to bring about the collapse of the Hamas government in Gaza, but that is not going to happen.

Hamas control of Gaza is a decision of the Palestinians, and the Hamas government is no less legitimate than many other regimes in the region. They won the election and they

want to exercise their sovereignty on an area where they actually won the hearts and minds of the people. It is not up to Israel to decide who is going to control the Palestinians in Gaza. I believe that Israel and Hamas can find a way to live together, but that doesn't mean that Hamas will ever agree to a real peace and to an end to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

The principle of land swaps has already been discussed as part of the two-state solution between Israelis and Palestinians. Why can't we have multilateral swaps between Israel, Palestine, and Egypt?

If we make Gaza double or triple its current size by adding additional territory from Egyptian Sinai - say another 600 sq. km. - this could give Gaza the space it needs. Suddenly Gaza would have the space to build a new city of a million people, along with a real seaport and airport, and to create the conditions that would make economic expansion possible. At the same time, Israel needs 600 sq. km. in the West Bank because the 1967 line is unacceptable from Israel's point of view. In return, Israel could give to Egypt 600 sq. km. in the Negev in southern Israel. At the end of the day no one loses land, while multilateral swaps enable us to solve the currently intractable problem of Gaza and solve Israeli needs in the West Bank.

According to the two-state solution, Israel will be required to evacuate some 100,000 people from the West Bank. Yet that is something the State of Israel cannot bear. The economic price alone of such a move is about $30 billion, an amount that is beyond the capability of the state. In addition, there is the security factor. Six hundred sq. km. is about 12 percent of the West Bank, which is the minimum that can secure the real vital interests of the State of Israel.

With this plan, not only does Egypt lose nothing, but at the end of the day Egypt can gain significant benefits from this arrangement. The new seaport and airport next to Egypt can become major economic connections between the Gulf and Europe. Furthermore, Egypt could get a land corridor to enable movement from Egypt to the rest of the Middle East without the need to cross Israel.

In this proposal no one loses anything - neither Egypt, nor the Palestinians, nor Israel. This doesn't solve all of the problems, but it does solve at least one significant problem - the territorial dimension.

The bottom line is that the two-state solution is a very nice slogan, and no one takes any political risk by endorsing it, but it cannot be achieved in the foreseeable future. So we have to decide if there is something better for all the relevant parties. We can either stay more or less in the same situation and try to manage the conflict, or we can try to think of some other solution.

When you ask the Egyptians and the Jordanians the direct question: Are you interested in the solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? The answer is: Yes. Is it your interest to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Yes. However, an interest is not only something

that you want to happen. It is something that you want and are ready to pay for in order to get it.

So far, the only thing that Israel hears from the Arab world is that they want the two-state solution to happen. But what exactly is the contribution the Arab world is prepared to make to achieve this? What kind of proactive role are they ready to take? Taking concrete steps to solve the territorial problem is one thing that the Arab countries can contribute, even if they get back whatever they give in this proposed trilateral swap.

The Problem of Palestinian Leadership

I would say that Palestinian society is divided into three groups. Maybe 20 percent of the people are supportive of Hamas. They are religious, they believe in this ideology, and they will be against any agreement with Israel. Another 20 percent are more moderate, secular, and they really want peace. The remaining 60 percent are the silent majority. Many of these people will follow whoever can deliver, whoever can give them something. While the only side that is offering something to the people is Hamas, if you offer them the proposal suggested here and say that this is a chance to build something that gives you real hope to someday become the Singapore of the Middle East, things might change if there were the right leadership, which is missing today.

In the end, nothing can happen unless there is a real Palestinian leadership that accepts this proposal. In a way, this is similar to the policy of the first Israeli prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, who said we cannot get all that we want, we have to make real concessions. But he was ready to pay the price and move forward because he wanted to have a state for his people. So far, this is not the message of the Palestinian leaders when they speak about the importance of an independent state. Palestinian rhetoric speaks about misery, about justice, about how Israel is doing terrible things. But the efforts that are made in order to improve what can be improved within domestic Palestinian society are minimal, and unless there is a change in this attitude, I agree that certain important conditions for peace are missing.

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Maj.-Gen. (res.) Giora Eiland chaired Israel's National Security Council from 2004 to 2006. Prior to that he served as head of the IDF's Operations Branch and its Planning Directorate. This *Jerusalem* Issue Brief is based on his presentation at the Institute for Contemporary Affairs in Jerusalem on November 17, 2008.