



The partition plan

With the collapse of the peace talks we need a major initiative to delineate borders between Israel and Palestine as a first step towards partition

RESOLUTION OF the conflict with the Palestinians is clearly in Israel's best interests. It would significantly enhance our national security and help enshrine fundamental Jewish, universal and moral values. It is essential, urgent and doable, and the vast majority of Israelis support it.

But the road to a permanent settlement resolving all the core issues remains long and arduous. And the big question facing Israel is how to set in train a process leading to internationally recognized borders that encompass a democratic state with a clear Jewish majority.

Israeli leaders need to come up with a clear plan. They need to put practical strategic alternatives on the table, including independent steps towards a two-state reality. In other words, Israel must initiate a process leading to "two states for two peoples" either by negotiation, "Plan A," or unilaterally, "Plan B."

Preservation of the status quo runs counter to the Israeli interest. The historic processes in and around Israel are dynamic and in some cases irreversible. In an inherently unstable region, Israeli leaders need to be ahead of the game. Early preparation for various scenarios and responsible, farsighted judgment are key – especially on the Palestinian front.

Unfortunately, after the collapse of the latest round of negotiations, the focus is now on marginal matters, like whose fault was it, how each side responds to the accusations of the other, and who corners whom in the international arena. As for the recent Hamas-Fatah reconciliation on the Palestinian side,

Israel's knee-jerk response was stupid – blanket denunciation of the other side is no way to promote a two-state reality.

But nor is there any reason to celebrate. We have seen this movie more than once or twice. It could be to Israel's long-term advantage, but it is too early to judge. The reconciliation and the anticipated unity government in its wake are better than the current split between Gaza and the West Bank – if, and only if, Hamas recognizes Israel, renounces terror and honors past agreements.

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In an effort to get the two-state process back on track, the Americans might put a paper on the table. That would be a good thing for all concerned. But even then Israel would still be responding, not initiating. We have to stop being dependent on what the Palestinians do or don't do, or even on American mediation, which may or may not be more productive in the future.

We must act on our own initiative for our own good.

The chances of the Palestinians agreeing

in the foreseeable future to proposals they rejected in the past are close to zero. So are the prospects of the current Likud-led government offering what former prime ministers Ehud Barak and Ehud Olmert offered the Palestinians in 2000 and 2008.

However, irrespective of Israel's positions, allowing persistent Palestinian rejectionism to dictate the outcome is tantamount to giving the Palestinians a veto on the nature of the Israeli state and its national security in the broadest sense. Israel cannot allow its Jewish and democratic character to be subject to Palestinian decision or whim.

What we need to do now is launch a major initiative to delineate borders between Israel and Palestine as a first step towards partition, even in the absence of full peace. A more comprehensive agreement would have to have broad domestic legitimacy on both sides. It would need mutual trust, brave and rational leadership, genuine reconciliation, recognition of and respect for each side's historical narrative – in other words, a long process of preparing hearts and minds. In the meantime, we will have begun delineating a border for which, if we are put to the test, we will be ready to sacrifice our lives.

To preserve the identity and spirit of the Jewish and democratic state, we must set borders. First and foremost, geographical borders. Then will we be able to draw clearer lines for all aspects of Israeli life – for example, equality in sharing the defense and civilian burdens, rooting out



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corruption and strengthening the rule of law. Indeed, we will not be able to optimize prosperity, welfare, equality, education and national resilience until we disengage from the Palestinians.

PRIME MINISTER Benjamin Netanyahu seems to share this view. Since his Bar-Ilan University speech in June 2009, he has repeated at every important international forum that Israel has no desire to rule over the Palestinians or to run their lives. In the Bar-Ilan address he outlined a vision of two independent states: “In this small land of ours, two peoples live freely, side by side, in amity and mutual respect. Each with its own flag, its own national anthem and its own government,” he declared. But in the five years that have elapsed since then, Israel has singularly failed to make any substantive progress towards achieving that goal.

Of course, a permanent settlement based on real peace is preferable to any other alternative. But it is simply not attainable in the foreseeable future. In the meantime, we are being dragged down to a choice between a Jewish-dominated apartheid state or a shared unitary Jewish-Palestinian state. This was not what the Jewish state’s founders and visionaries intended.

We have to act with a sense of urgency. We need to put realistic alternatives on the table now – including unilateral steps towards a two-state reality. Obviously, such a plan entails very sensitive and complex moves, and would need wide public sup-

port, possibly through a referendum or elections. Therefore, I propose that such steps only be actively implemented after it becomes crystal clear that reaching an agreed permanent peace settlement is not feasible.

Moreover, such steps will need meticulous government planning. Relocating settlers from outside the large settlement blocs requires a comprehensive national plan, including relevant legislation and rehousing on a massive scale. At the same time, the government must emphasize that the door remains open for dialogue with the Palestinians. Moreover, unilateral steps will only be justified if the diplomatic, security and moral benefits are greater than the price of internal division. It will be the government’s job to prepare public opinion.

We will have to absorb tens of thousands of settlers who return to live within the new borders, whether demarcated unilaterally or by agreement. Either way, the IDF would remain in areas we evacuate, like the Jordan Valley, until security responsibility is taken over by a party we can trust.

On the regional level, Israel must talk to the leaders of prominent Arab League states, affirming its readiness in principle to reestablish a multilateral framework, possibly within the context of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative as the basis for dialogue. One of the aims would be to create a permanent regional platform to back Israeli and Palestinian peace moves.

For the sake of Israel’s future in the region, the government, any government,

must take the initiative. Israel needs to shape the reality it envisions – through interim agreements, well-managed transitional periods and possibly through unilateral partition moves, if it transpires that there is no genuine partner for peace. Once that becomes clear, Israel should consider unilateral withdrawal to an interim border it decides on – along the security barrier between Israel and the West Bank, or slightly east of it.

Unilateral partition is not ideal. It is rather an Israeli default choice in the absence of any realistic chance of achieving a comprehensive peace agreement. But it is not meant to block a future Israeli-Palestinian accord. On the contrary, it should help promote a peace deal. If possible, it should be carried out in tandem with other diplomatic moves contributing to genuine peacemaking.

The unilateral partition is primarily intended to promote Israel’s fundamental interest in a two-state reality. But it would also free the vast majority of Palestinians in the West Bank from Israeli rule, and ease the day-to-day reality of Palestinian life during the transitional period until a permanent agreement is reached. ■

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