Managing the Conflict: The Next Stage

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On a day-to-day level, the agenda of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is set by the principal parties themselves. However, international parties are also displaying direct interest in the conflict and are involved in an attempt to bring it to an end. This involvement occasionally fosters coalitions to advance particular issues, though not necessarily according to expected alliances. For example, two positions have emerged regarding elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council: the American administration and Hamas are in favor of holding the elections while Israel and the Palestinian Authority are interested in their postponement. Thus, international involvement in the conflict heightens the complexity in finding a way to advance a solution. Described below are the viewpoints of the four key players regarding the next stage of managing the conflict: Israel, the Palestinians, the international community, and the Arab world.

The Israeli Angle

The message Israel has sent over the past thirty-eight years to the Palestinians and to the rest of the world, particularly the Arab world, is that it is the party responsible for dealing with and solving the Palestinian problem. Israel will proceed without any external assistance – certainly without intervention. This message has been conveyed explicitly or by conscious omission, at least at six critical junctions:

1. The peace treaty between Israel and Egypt (1979): Israel returned the Sinai to Egypt and according to the treaty, was left with the responsibility for establishing Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza.
2. The Lebanon War (1982): Israel embarked on a military move in Lebanon, designed to solve a dimension of the Palestinian issue that developed north of the border.
3. The confederation between the West Bank and Jordan: This issue had already arisen on the regional agenda in 1974, and was discussed more concretely in the 1980s. A

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confederation between Jordan and the West Bank would grant a new dimension to the Arab-Israeli conflict, embedding the Palestinian issue within a conflict between two states, Israel and Jordan. Israel waived the option of imbuing the conflict with an inter-state context, which is quite a common phenomenon in the world, and insisted on confronting the Palestinian nation directly, which lacked independence and was under occupation.

4. The Oslo agreement (1993): The primary significance of the agreement was that the Palestinians and Israel know how to resolve their conflict for the welfare of both sides and as a stage leading to the creation of a new Middle East.
5. The Camp David conference (2000): Ehud Barak claimed that he offered a comprehensive bilateral solution that would benefit both sides. As is well known, this attempt failed.
6. Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip (2005): The disengagement signified an Israeli solution, based on Israeli interests, to the shared Israeli-Palestinian problem. In other words, even in the absence of a Palestinian partner, Israel does not involve a third party.

Israel's actions or lapses at these junctures explain how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, originally part of the Arab-Israeli conflict, has become more problematic for Israel than in 1967. However, a return to the 1967 borders does not imply a return to the same realities prevailing on the eve of the Six Day War. Before the war the State of Israel was responsible for itself. The Palestinians were the responsibility of Arab countries – Egypt was responsible for the Gaza Strip, while Jordan bore responsibility for the West Bank. Yet in the years that passed, another political entity was born, the Palestinian Authority, ultimately destined to become the state of Palestine. This country-to-be lacks an infrastructure for independent existence; therefore the world expects Israel to support it. A key argument for this demand is that assistance of this sort would serve Israel's interests because it would stabilize the Palestinian state and prevent it from falling into the hands of radical elements. Furthermore, this state will be split territorially, and in order for the state to be sustainable, its two portions must be connected via roads and trains, even at the price of encroaching on Israel's sovereignty. In other words, the world

expects Israel both to return to the 1967 borders and take responsibility for an additional political entity.

The Palestinian Angle

The principal dispute between Israel and the Palestinians deals with the process, rather than the contents. On the basis of its interpretation of the roadmap, Israel contends it is unwise to launch any political discussion before the Palestinian Authority dismantles all the terror infrastructures. The Palestinian position is antithetical to Israel's. In total contrast to Israel's position, the Palestinians maintain that it is impossible to make progress towards a state where one law and one bearer of arms prevails as long as Israel occupies territories and before the realization of a negotiated political solution. Therefore, the Palestinian Authority demands a binding timetable for any process leading to a settlement and, above all, international guarantees that Israel will fulfill its part in the defined stages towards ending the conflict. Only after an agreement is signed would it be possible (perhaps) to confront Hamas.

The contrast between the position of the Palestinians and of Israel regarding the peace process is not new, but over the past year the gap between these positions has widened. Therefore, statements such as "the disengagement from the Gaza Strip opened a window of opportunity for renewing the political process" do not reflect the political reality prevailing on the ground.

The International Angle

The international community expects a swift implementation of the solution because it regards it as a viable solution. The solution is essentially the Clinton plan, commonly accepted (with minor modifications) as a formula that balances between Israel's needs and the aspirations of the Palestinians. According to this plan, Israel will be obliged to make territorial concessions and hand over to the Palestinians more land than it had intended; on the other hand, the Palestinians will agree to a return of refugees on a smaller scale than they had wanted. Moreover, according to certain Palestinian and Israeli spokespersons, both sides were close to an agreement in the spirit of this plan at the Camp David summit (2000) and at the Taba summit (2001).

Another reason for the expectation of a quick solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is that the world has tired of it. In mid-2005 participants at the G-8 Summit decided to invest another $3 billion in Palestinian assistance. However the donor states do not view this assistance as helping the Palestinians, but interpret it as funding the continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That is, the problems in the territories stem from a political reality that does not allow the Palestinian entity to sustain itself. Financial assistance helps preserve the status quo by defusing the immediacy of the crisis. The expectation is that the end of the occupation will solve the economic problems and thus lessen the need for further contributions.

The international prism suggests that not only will problems in the territories be solved once Israel withdraws, but also problems oppressing other nations. Britain's prime minister Tony Blair stated in an interview that indeed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not the actual reason for the terrorist attacks carried out in London by Pakistanis and others, but the conflict gives them an excuse. He argued that once the conflict is solved, terrorists would be denied a pretext for attacks. This link between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and terror in the international arena imparts added validity to the urgency the world ascribes to the need for a settlement. (At the same time, there is a gap between the extent to which the international community wishes to see an end to the occupation and the extent of its interest in the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. In Israel these two goals are seen as one. However, the world perceives the occupation – pictured by the lowly individual at the roadblock – as a factor that is much more bothersome than the absence of a Palestinian state on the global map.)

A quick solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would be a welcome contribution to the US effort to advance democratization in the Middle East. The Palestinian issue is perceived by the administration in a wider context, i.e., its settlement will facilitate the processes of democratization in the entire region. The administration is trying to advance two conflicting goals: democratization and stability. Democratization is the more important of the two because in its eyes the stability of pro-West, conservative, and dictatorial regimes in the Middle East is illusory. The events of September 11, 2001 are evidence of the threat liable to sprout up out of this imagined stability. Therefore democratization is supposed to advance regional stability in the long term, even if in the

short term instability will result due to political change. The most obvious expression of democracy is the election process, and the administration is encouraging the elections in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Palestinian Authority. In addition, though it is far from pleased with the prospect, the administration does not oppose the participation of Hamas in the elections if the movement's inclusion is a condition for holding the elections on time.

US support for Israel, especially in matters related to security, is stable, spans administrations, and is part of the American national ethos that goes beyond parochial interests. It is in the spirit of President Bush's letter of April 14, 2004, where he maintained, "The United States reiterates its steadfast commitment to Israel's security, including secure, defensible borders, and to preserve and strengthen Israel's capability to deter and defend itself, by itself, against any threat or possible combination of threats." However, in regard to political solutions to a problem in which humanitarian considerations are also involved, the US maintains a more balanced stance. Therefore, American support for Israel is not assured on every issue or in any event.

The Arab World

The Arab world is not necessarily interested in solving the Arab-Israeli conflict. To be sure, the Arab world does not want war, does not support the intifada and the possibility of an escalated Israeli-Palestinian confrontation, and is certainly not interested in a Hamas victory in the elections. What the Arab world is interested in is stability, i.e., a continuation of the conflict within controlled limits. At the sane time, settling the conflict will raise questions that the Arab regimes are trying to evade. The main fear is democratization, socio-economic liberalism, and the like. Settling the conflict would deny any pretext for delaying reforms in these spheres. The continuation of the conflict shields these regimes against US pressure for democratization, with Egypt's policy in this context a striking example.

The Implications for Israel

The current paradigm embraced by the Israeli public, the Arab world, and the international community is that a settlement of "two states for two nations" is based on two assumptions. First, the borders of the overall solution lie between the Jordan River

and the Mediterranean Sea. Second, the border between the two states will be based on the 1967 line. These premises are the starting points for negotiations. Within this context we may ask: is this paradigm a basis for a realizable settlement?

Consider, for example, the demographic perspective. Currently 1.4 million people live in the Gaza Strip. In fifteen years the projected number of residents in Gaza will exceed 2.5 million. It is difficult to suppose that the Gaza district, as part of an autonomous or independent Palestinian entity, would be a region where its residents enjoy a reasonable quality of life and living standard. In any case the demographic discussion must take into account the overall number of people living in the region that lies between the Jordan and the Mediterranean. Today, approximately 11 million people live in the region. In the year 2020 about 16 million people will live there, and in the year 2050, over 30 million people. The area running from the Beersheba line northwards, including the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, will be the most populated on earth. This development will create a shortage of resources – water, land, and so on – a hardship that will have severe social and political implications. Therefore, some of the problems at the root of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are not only connected with the difficulty of the two sides to accept reciprocity, but also with the demographic attributes of the tiny region in which the two nations live.

In near future, certainly in the months preceding elections, the debate in Israel is not on the contents (of a possible settlement with the Palestinians), but on the process only. Predictably, all the large parties have accepted the validity of the current paradigm, two states between the Jordan and the Mediterranean. There are therefore three possible approaches for Israel. The first approach was expressed by the chairman of the Labor Party, Amir Peretz, when he said there must be a return to the Oslo process in order to discuss a permanent settlement. The basic assumption of this approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is that only a political process can dispel, even if partially, the motives for terror. This concept was already explored, and there is still cause to try it again while correcting past tactical mistakes.

The second approach represents the theoretical basis for the roadmap. By Israel's interpretation, as long as there is no solution to the problem of terror, it is impossible to revive the political process. Israel will fight terror until the Palestinians understand they

must curb it before negotiations can be resumed. This process will last one, two, five, or ten years.

The third approach is that Israel must take unilateral steps – small, large or highly significant – such as withdrawal up to the separation fence. Dialogue with the Palestinians will perhaps be renewed in the future, but in the meanwhile Israel will act alone to construct a stable security reality.

Conclusion

In the near future the question of dialogue with Hamas will be placed on the agenda. Israel is not satisfied with the participation of Hamas in elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council, but it is not trying to prevent the elections by force. It can be assumed that even if Hamas does not win a majority, its achievement will be considerable, channeling it into part of the Palestinian executive branch and consequently the government and security apparatus. Some of the Palestinian force commanders will therefore be Hamas personnel. This development obliges the formulation of appropriate courses of action.

In the longer term the question is which approach will be adopted for dealing with the conflict? The international community adheres to the paradigm of two states for two nations, namely a Palestinian state alongside Israel, and maintains that this solution to the conflict may be quickly realized. The problem is that this solution will not necessarily assure stability.