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Have the Palestinians Despaired of the Two-State Formula?

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Abu Alaa on the Peace Process and Two-States-for-Two-Peoples

In a recently published essay, Ahmed Qurei (Abu Alaa) called for the Palestinian leadership to consider renouncing the two-state formula that underlies the Israeli-Palestinian political process. As a possible alternative, he suggests examining the idea of a bi-national state: "The two-state plan," he writes, "has lost its vitality and has gradually expired after a long period strewn with hopes for a just resolution and comprehensive peace in the region."

Abu Alaa, the most senior Palestinian negotiator in the last twenty years, places most of the blame on the Israeli governments of these decades, claiming they paid lip service to the two-state vision but systematically worked to prevent its realization, especially via the settlements. As the person charged with the Jerusalem portfolio in the Palestinian Authority, Abu Alaa places special emphasis on the accelerated process of "the Judaization of Jerusalem" that is making it impossible to turn East Jerusalem into the capital of the Palestinian state. At the same time, Abu Alaa does not ignore the role played by Arab states that have, according to him, shown "indifference to the needs of the Palestinians," and that of the international community, which demonstrates "hypocrisy" in its conduct toward the Palestinians.

Sari Nusseibeh on Two-States-for-Two-Peoples

A similar idea was floated a few months ago by Prof. Sari Nusseibeh: "There is no East Jerusalem any more," he stated. "East Jerusalem has already become a misnomer. But a Palestinian state without East Jerusalem as its capital is a no-no." The pursuit of two states is like a "fantasy bubble." Half a million Israelis, he explains, currently live in the West Bank. "Can you take away half a million people?" he asks. His answer is unambiguous: "No, you cannot...in politics not everything is always possible."

Unlike Abu Alaa, Nusseibeh does not absolve the PA of responsibility, and along with blame on Israel he claims that "it took us, the Palestinians, a long time to accept that we should recognize Israel as a state." Now, he stressed, the Palestinians need a farsighted

and accountable leader. Nusseibeh does not point to a possible permanent solution, perhaps because of a reluctance to predict long term moves under current circumstances. He proposes an interim solution ("transition") of a unified nation, whereby "the Jews could run the country" and the Palestinians "would be allowed to have basic rights."

In his opinion, a proposal of this sort would be embraced by Israel, as such a proposal was made long ago by Israeli intellectuals, the most prominent of whom was Martin Buber. The realization of such a plan would finally allow the Palestinians the freedom to move and work wherever they want within the borders of a single country. They would also be able to realize the right of return. The one-state solution would allow the establishment of Palestinian enclaves in places where Palestinians used to live and to which Palestinians would be able to return.

Indeed, it has been several years since Nusseibeh has been thought to have any significant influence in the PA government. Nonetheless, his ideas and those of Abu Alaa are by no means uncommon in the Palestinian arena. Other figures, albeit less well-known, have expressed themselves in similar terms with slight differences.

The Background to the Change

These remarks apparently reflect growing despair within the Palestinian leadership regarding hope for the peace process with Israel in general and the viability of a two-state solution in particular. This sense propelled the Palestinian bid for international recognition of a Palestinian state unilaterally via UN institutions rather than through negotiations.

The current situation assessment by many circles within the Palestinian public seems to be based on the following considerations:

- a. The hopes pinned on President Obama and his ability to force Israel to stop construction in the settlements and accept an arrangement in line with the Palestinian position have been dashed. The question of whether Obama cannot or doesn't want to impose his will is irrelevant from the Palestinians' perspective. In practice, the result is a complete deadlock in the political process, along with accelerated construction in the Jewish West Bank.
- b. Under Prime Minister Netanyahu, Israel has succeeded in effecting dramatic change in the global agenda. Over a year ago the Palestinian issue was high on the American agenda: senior figures in the administration repeatedly claimed that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was one of the major factors in the region's instability. Therefore its resolution was a primary interest of the United States and an element of great importance in enhancing the status of the US in this region. These statements are no longer heard. The Iranian issue currently tops the Western agenda and has pushed the Palestinian question to the sidelines.

- c. The "Arab Spring," led by the events in Syria and Egypt, has helped sideline the Palestinian issue. The Arab League, which in the past was important in raising the Palestinian issue on the global agenda, has lost much of its power and can no longer serve as a leading actor on the international arena.
- d. Until recently, Netanyahu's right wing government has demonstrated impressive survival skills. It has exhibited stability and cohesion and seems to have persuaded many on the international arena that in light of the upheavals in the Arab world, engagement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict requires a cautious, gradual approach.

Conclusion

Within the Palestinian leadership and other circles, a recognition that the Israeli-Palestinian peace process cannot lead to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state alongside the State of Israel is gradually taking root. The perception that Israeli governments have paid lip service to the two-state solution but have in fact not done much to make it happen is palpable.

With Israel led to date by a right wing government, the Palestinians' sense of helplessness in breaking the deadlock has intensified. The contours of a Palestinian state as outlined by Prime Minister Netanyahu (including a demilitarized state, Israeli control of the Jordan Valley, and a united Jerusalem under Israeli control) have almost certainly added to the Palestinian sense that a dialogue with Israel will not yield any satisfactory results for the Palestinians.

Nevertheless, the current Palestinian leadership still clings to the two-state vision. In an April 16, 2012 interview with *al-Ayyam*, Abu Mazen stated: "Israel is making the two-state vision impossible to realize because of the construction in the settlements...In the end, [however,] despite Israel's efforts, the two-state vision will continue to exist. I've heard many calls for the establishment of a single state. I wouldn't want to prevent people from speaking freely, but I support the two-state vision."

Against this backdrop, and since the appeal to the United Nations has thus far not led to the desired results, from the Palestinian point of view, all that remains to be done by the Palestinian leadership is to hope that one or more of the following ensues:

- a. The Iranian problem is solved one way or another in the coming months, which would allow the reinstatement of the Palestinian issue on the top of the global agenda.
- b. President Obama, who has demonstrated a deep commitment to settling the conflict on the basis of the two-state formula, will be elected to a second term. Lacking the political constraints of a candidate seeking reelection, President

Obama could level intense pressure on Israel and force it to soften its stances and progress toward a permanent solution.

- c. The idea that maintaining the status quo and that the lack of a settlement on the basis of the two-state solution is a scenario that endangers the Jewish and democratic nature of the State of Israel will intensify among Israeli public opinion, and later, within the country's leadership. This idea, so the Palestinians may hope, will enjoy large public support in the coming elections.

If these hopes are ultimately dashed, and perhaps even before that, the Palestinian leadership, for lack of a better choice, will likely turn again to a unilateral move. In a meeting with a Geneva initiative delegation in early April, Abu Mazen stated that if within a month he does not receive a positive response from Prime Minister Netanyahu to his letter, the PA will turn to the UN General Assembly and ask to upgrade its status from observer to non-member state.

If the unilateral move again fails to generate the desired outcome, and in light of the PA's stance that rules out widespread violence against Israel, the position of Abu Alaa, Nusseibeh, and others will likely take greater hold among the Palestinian public in general and its leadership in particular.

