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Israel70 | Just don't do it: The ramifications of a termination of the Oslo Accords

by Gilead Sher

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Gilead Sher is a former Israeli senior peace negotiator and former Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Ehud Barak. In this essay he argues that despite the flaws of the Oslo Accords and the current paralysis in the peace process all parties stand to lose far more from the cancellation of the Accords than they would gain. He explains in sobering detail the multiple ways in which Israelis, Palestinians and the international community would all suffer, warning that 'if cancelling Oslo means resorting to one state, this would be lethal to Zionism and to the Palestinian goal to have their own state established throughout a negotiation process. Such a scenario would result in perpetual conflict and a most likely deterioration to a civil war'.[1]

Introduction

Two and a half decades have passed since the 1993 Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements and the subsequent 1995 Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (the 'Oslo Accords'). Both agreements were attained throughout an extensive process of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations over three years and sponsored by the international community led by the US. A number of rounds of negotiations (1991-2001, 2007-2008, 2013-2014) failed to reach the end of conflict or to bring claims to a close in a mutual agreement. There seem to be long odds to resolving in the foreseeable future the Israeli-Palestinian conflict comprehensively if at all, in a permanent-status agreement.

The Oslo accord was designed to last for a period of five years, during which time further negotiations were to take place to move the process forward. The identified final status core issues – Jerusalem, refugees, territory and boundaries, security arrangements – that were supposed to be negotiated and subsequently resolved during that five-year period have yet to be agreed upon. Both parties have at various points in time suggested that they would terminate the Oslo Accords due to violations or non-compliance by the other party, or due to the continuous stalemate, as a domestic political token, or to gain leverage over the other party.

The Israeli-Palestinian status quo being as fragile as it is, this essay discusses the ramifications of either party unilaterally canceling the Oslo Accords. Cancellation has pros and cons for each of the parties involved: Israelis, Palestinians, regional actors

and the international community. This essay concludes that despite the flaws of the Oslo Accords and some benefits to the Israelis and/or the Palestinians in the aftermath of a cancellation, overall, all parties stand to lose from such cancellation far more than they would gain.

In the nearly two and half decades since the signing of the Oslo Accords (Oslo), leaders from both Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) have threatened to cancel the agreements.[2] Perhaps most significantly, at the UN conference in September 2015, PA leader Mahmoud Abbas announced to the assembly, '[we] will not remain the only ones committed to the implementation of these agreements. We therefore declare that we cannot continue to be bound by these agreements and that Israel must assume all of its responsibilities as an occupying power, because the status quo cannot continue'. This was widely interpreted to be a threat that the Palestinians would no longer abide by the Oslo Accords, thus cancelling the 1993 and 1995 agreements that have served as the basis for Israeli-Palestinian co-existence and peace negotiations for over two decades. However, the speech was also widely judged to be 'little more than an empty gesture – and may speak more to Abbas's political desperation than anything else'.

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