

The End of a Viable Palestinian State

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The fatal flaw in most analyses of the Israel-Palestine conflict is the assumption that if the Palestinians can just get a state of their own, then all will be fine. A state on all the Occupied Territories (UN Resolution 242), on most of the Occupied Territories (Oslo and the Road Map to the Geneva Initiative), on even on half the Occupied Territories (Sharon's notion) – it doesn't matter. Once there's a Palestinian state the conflict is over and we can all move on to the next item on the agenda.

Wrong. A Palestinian state can just as easily be a prison as a legitimate state that addresses the national aspirations of its people. The crucial issue is viability. Israel is a small country, but it is three times larger than the Palestinian areas. The entire Occupied Areas – the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza – make up only 22% of Israel/Palestine. That means that even if all of the territories Israel conquered in 1967 were relinquished, it would still comprise a full 78% of the country. Would the Palestinian areas constitute a viable state? Barely. Just the size of the American state of Delaware (but with three times the population before refugees return), it would at least have a coherent territory, borders with Israel, Jordan, Syria and Egypt, a capital in Jerusalem, a port on the Mediterranean, an airport in Gaza, a viable economy (based on Holy Land tourism, agriculture and hi-tech) and access to the water of the Jordan River. An accepted member of the international community enjoying trade with its neighbors – and enjoying as well the support of a far-flung, highly educated and affluent diaspora – a small Palestinian state would have a shot at viability.

This is what Israel seeks to prevent. Ever since becoming the head of the Ministerial Committee on Settlements in the Begin government back in 1977, Ariel Sharon has been completely up-front about his intention of securing the entire Land of Israel for the Jewish people. "Security" has nothing to do with Israel's expansionist policies. Successive Israeli governments did not establish 200 settlements because of security. Nor did they build a massive infrastructure of Israeli-only highways that link the settlement blocs irreversibly into Israel for security reasons. Nor can the route of the Separation Barrier, nor the policy of expropriating Palestinian land and systematically demolishing Palestinian homes be explained by "security." They all derive from one central goal: to claim the entire country for Israel. Period.

Still, Israel cannot "digest" the 3.6 million Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories. Giving them citizenship would nullify Israel as a Jewish state; not giving them citizenship, yet keeping them forever under occupation would constitute outright apartheid. What to do?

The answer is clear: establish a tiny Palestinian state of, say, five or six cantons (Sharon's term) on 40-70% of the Occupied Territories, completely surrounded and controlled by

Israel. Such a Palestinian state would cover only 10-15% of the entire country and would have no meaningful sovereignty and viability: no coherent territory, no freedom of movement, no control of borders, no capital in Jerusalem, no economic viability, no control of water, no control of airspace or communications, no military - not even the right as a sovereign state to enter into alliances without Israeli permission.

And since the Palestinians will never agree to this, Israel must "create facts on the ground" that prejudice negotiations even before they begin. Last week's announcement that Israel is constructing 3500 housing units in E-1, a corridor connecting Jerusalem to the West Bank settlement of Ma'aleh Adumim, seals the fate of the Palestinian state. As a key element of an Israeli "Greater Jerusalem," the E-1 plan removes any viability from a Palestinian state. It cuts the West Bank in half, allowing Israel to control Palestinian movement from one part of their country to another, while isolating East Jerusalem from the rest of Palestinian territory. Since 40% of the Palestinian economy revolves around Jerusalem and its tourist-based economy, the E-1 plan effectively cuts the economic heart out of any Palestinian state, rendering it nothing more than a set of non-viable Indian reservations.

If there is any silver lining in the E-1 plan, it is that it has highlighted American complicity in Israel's settlement expansion. The Bush Administration, while calling the E-1 plan "unhelpful," nevertheless formally recognized the Ma'aleh Adumim settlement bloc, together with E-1, in last year's agreement between Bush and Sharon - a fundamental American policy change that was ratified almost unanimously by Congress. This puts the US in the very uncomfortable position of undermining its own Road Map initiative, which stems from the "Bush vision" of an Israeli-Palestinian peace. It also neutralizes completely America's role as an honest broker, and pits it against the other three members of the Road Map Quartet - Europe, the UN and Russia - who deplore the change in American policy. Most tragically, American support for Sharon's settlement project destroys forever the possibility of a viable Palestinian state, dooming the peoples of Israel-Palestine to perpetual conflict. How this squares with American interests in a stable Middle East is anybody's guess.

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