

The Meaning of a True Palestinian State. A Strategy to End Occupation

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Since the Palestine Liberation Organisation led by Yasser Arafat recognised the state of Israel over 20 years ago, the general framework for a claims-ending solution accepted by the Israeli and Palestinian leadership has been a deal that would create a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. But now, two decades later, that framework has been completely exposed as a sham, and the number of people who believe such a solution is achievable, let alone worthwhile, is consistently dwindling.

So, do the Palestinians want a state? Or, perhaps more importantly, should the Palestinians want a state? This seems like a straightforward question with an even more straightforward answer. At the beginning of the Washington-led peace process and during creation of the Palestinian Authority in the mid-1990s the answer sure seemed to be a resounding 'yes'. There were plenty of reservations about this strategy however, especially among Palestinians concerned that such a solution would disenfranchise the rights of refugees. Nevertheless, many Palestinians including the formal leadership was on board.

Today, the answer to this question is not so clear, and for good reason. In the course of 20 years of negotiations, Palestinians learned that the concept of a "state" that they had in mind was different from the one that Israel - their occupier - would permit them to have, and in turn different from what the United States was willing to support. Despite the "historic compromise" PLO leaders often refer to - the relinquishing of claims on 78 per cent of historic Palestine - a Palestinian state would not emerge on the remaining 22 per cent. Instead of getting closer to a territorially contiguous and sovereign political entity they could call a state, Palestinians were constantly facing increased Israeli colonisation of their territory.

Wanting a true state

The size of the territory allotted for this "state" continued to shrink with every new settlement home. The Israelis remained adamant about maintaining control over the air space and borders of any Palestinian state, retaining a military presence in the Jordan River valley (about 30 per cent of the West Bank), retaining the illegally annexed occupied Jerusalem and refusing a new Palestinian state to have an army. Essentially, this would be a state in name only, lacking the all important features of sovereignty, and would be the de facto continuation of the occupation with different window dressing.

The question then is: do the Palestinians want this state? No, clearly not. In fact, the Palestinian cause was only about statehood insofar as a state could be a vehicle for realising

Palestinian human and political rights. Since its inception, the Palestinian cause has been about two central issues 1) the right of Palestinians to live in Palestine (this includes the right of refugees to return to their towns and villages if they choose) and 2) the right to self-determination and sovereignty. It has never, contrary to Zionism, been about a fear driven desire for ethno-centric domination.

Public opinion polling of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza reveals that 74 per cent of Palestinians consider ending the occupation and achieving the right to return as the two most important Palestinian goals. The maximalist version of the concept of a Palestinian state permitted by the Washington sponsored Peace Process does not even accommodate the minimalist version of Palestinian rights.

Perhaps one reason the process has drifted into this morass is because the intended goal has focused on a Palestinian state in name only, without much regard for what that state would look like or whether it would afford Palestinians their rights. This peace process would seemingly go forward endlessly if it could loosely attach the concept of a state to any hilltop in the West Bank, so long as there was a Palestinian leadership willing to go along with it. Palestinians cannot and should not accept a “state” at any cost.

A strategy to end occupation

For 20 years, the Washington-led peace process has succeeded in doing one thing better than anything else; giving Israel every incentive to maintain its occupation. By assigning the policing responsibilities for the urban centers to the Palestinian Authority and having the Europeans and the Americans pay for this project, Israel has effectively retained the security domination and colonial usurpation benefits inherent in occupation without having to be responsible for any of the costs. It can build settlements in Palestinian land and steal Palestinian water, both acts in direct opposition to international law, but simultaneously ditch obligations it has to the population it occupies and use the ongoing Peace Process to deflect international criticism for obviating Palestinian self-determination.

This game has to end, and the continuation of a Peace Process that only encourages relentless Israeli occupation exacerbates the situation. It’s time for a dramatic shift in the Israeli/Palestinian dynamic which places costs where they belong, on the occupier. Whether this will be born out diplomatic initiatives at the United Nations, non-violent popular uprising, or Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions is still unclear. Perhaps it’s all of the above.

What we know for sure is that Washington’s insistence on a failed status quo has only proved costly for Palestinians and beneficial for Israel. Palestinians should not be subjected, or subject themselves, to engaging Israel in an arena they are cornered into and disadvantaged in, but rather should choose to meet them in an arena where the the playing field is fair or to their advantage. Increasingly, this is anywhere in the world outside of Washington.

Any new Palestinian strategy must put reversing this “cost-free occupation” dynamic at its centre. Israel will only end its occupation when pressured to do so and it must be made to realise that it is more costly to maintain the occupation than end it.

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