

Closing window of opportunity for the two-state solution?

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Unexpected as it may be, a credible Palestinian state could be established within the next few years, enjoying geographical continuity, viable borders, and meaningful sovereign control over its population, territory, and natural resources, along with free access to the outside world.

The reasons for such a prospect may seem paradoxical, if not contradictory. One is that the internal Israeli debate revolves mainly around the extent of withdrawals from Palestinian territory in the West Bank (even including parts of East Jerusalem), rather than around the principle of withdrawal. There is a comparable process on the Palestinian side, whereby the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the dominant Fateh remain committed to achieving a negotiated peace with Israel, while Hamas is manoeuvring to be recognized as a valid interlocutor in direct negotiations with Israel over interim and permanent status issues. Israelis and Palestinians still diverge on significant aspects of the end goal and on the process for attaining it, but key political constituencies on both sides regard substantial territorial withdrawal and at least provisional Palestinian statehood within the coming few years as inevitable.

Unfortunately, there is equally strong reason to expect the peace process to stall. Most immediately, relentless Israeli settlement activity and the construction of the security barrier in the West Bank and East Jerusalem may lead to a renewal of Palestinian violence, while the continuing economic siege imposed by Israel may bring the PA to complete institutional collapse.

Much now depends on what Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon intends to do.

Since completing the Gaza disengagement, he has resisted international pressure to resume active diplomacy—in the guise of the Quartet's U.S.-drafted "Road Map for Peace"—by insisting that his government will not move further until it is satisfied that the Palestinian Authority (PA) has implemented its security commitments in full. This would confirm Palestinian fears that the Gaza disengagement was nothing but "Gaza first and last" or, as Sharon's senior advisor Dov Weisglass has frankly stated, "the amount of formaldehyde that's necessary so that there will not be a political process with the Palestinians" (Shavit 2004). Israeli refusal to return to the Road Map would present a major threat to the PA and the leadership of President Mahmoud Abbas, whose political fortunes ride on the assumption that a credible peace process can be resumed.

However, even Sharon cannot simply stonewall U.S. and EU pressure to return to the peace process indefinitely. He may therefore undertake new unilateral measures designed to pre-empt a return to the Road Map and to forestall its demand for a full settlement freeze. Specifically, Sharon may prepare a unilateral withdrawal from a significant area of the West Bank while intensifying settlement expansion and accelerating security barrier construction in and around East Jerusalem, including in the strategic corridor connecting the Maaleh Adumim settlement bloc to the city. The implicit logic is that this will deflect international pressure to proceed to permanent status negotiations—necessitating Israeli concessions on the fate of East Jerusalem and its Old City—within the foreseeable future and enable

Israel to significantly delay, if not wholly avoid, giving up any further territory in the West Bank. The precise extent of a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank could vary, but at a minimum it would include the 42–50 % percent of the territory that was ceded to PA control (Areas A and B under the autonomy accords).

Sharon has already signalled a further option: to extend unilateral Israeli recognition of a Palestinian state with provisional borders. International support for a Palestinian state makes this an attractive option, as far as Israel is concerned, and invites the international community to hold the Palestinian state legally and directly responsible for any attacks launched from its territory against Israel. Judging by the present course of the Israeli security barrier and the geographical distribution of settlement and bypass road construction, Sharon would probably draw provisional borders that leave the Palestinian state with about 80 % of the West Bank. This option would involve a strategic gamble, but it would allow the Israeli government to determine Palestinian borders, rather than have them determined by external actors on the basis of UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 and of the international consensus on the need for the final Palestinian–Israeli borders to approximate the 1949 armistice lines. As the borders would be provisional, Israel could justify maintaining control over the Palestinian state's land, sea, and air access to the outside world and over Palestinian natural resources such as aquifers and offshore gas deposits.

In short, the key attraction of further unilateral initiatives, from Sharon's point of view, is that they allow Israel to supplant the Road Map entirely and take full control of the pace and substantive content of further diplomacy. By creating a Palestinian state in this manner, Sharon may hope to prolong its provisional character well beyond the 2009 deadline envisaged by U.S. President George W. Bush. The international Quartet would be marginalized, as it would no longer set

performance targets for Israelis or Palestinians, nor would it be in a position to ensure that Palestinian statehood conforms to the parameters and guiding principles set out in the Road Map.

This scenario holds real dangers for Abbas, whose strategy is based on resuming an active peace process and on moving as soon as possible to permanent status issues, or at least to effective implementation of the Road Map. Revival of the Palestinian economy, reform of PA governance, and rehabilitation of the Palestinian political system all depend crucially on achieving real progress in the peace process. In its absence, Abbas has become a hostage to Hamas and to militants within his own movement, Fateh, and faces greater difficulty in pursuing internal reforms. Most worrying, from his point of view, is the idea of entering yet another open-ended, incremental, and drawn-out process in which the Palestinians have no effective say in setting pace and substance. Forthcoming elections may confront him with a parliament in which Hamas and Fateh militants are heavily represented, further impeding his room for diplomatic manoeuvre.

In the longer term, the absence of a viable two-state solution will lead to the decline or collapse of the PA, and possibly its replacement with alternative forms of Palestinian self-government. So long as Palestinians do not have the option of Israeli citizenship and remain politically disenfranchised, then Jordan will find itself drawn in, however unwillingly. Sharon and Likud may have formally given up the "Jordanian option" they advocated for so long, but the collapse of the two-state solution will have destabilizing effects on the kingdom's domestic politics and economy. Jordan cannot afford to stand idly by, and it will take active steps to pre-empt such an outcome, even if this means getting involved once more in Palestinian affairs.

The United States and the European Union can affect the outcome, but only if they act firmly and consistently. They have the

means to shepherd Israelis and Palestinians towards the end goals stated in the Road Map: comprehensive Israeli–Palestinian agreement on all permanent status issues, giving rise to a durable peace based on sovereign Palestinian statehood and security for Israel, coupled with a full and equitable territorial dispensation. However, although the Road Map has been accepted by all parties and endorsed by the UN Security Council, it has generally been honoured only rhetorically and will suffer serious erosion if the United States and the European Union do not demonstrate their faith in it and their determination to see it implemented in the course of 2006.

The United States and the European Union must demonstrate serious political will. They will face a major impediment in the future if Israel is allowed to entrench itself further in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and they may find themselves unable to reverse the settlement drive and salvage a durable peace. Conversely, allowing the peace process to drift is likely to lead to renewed violence and economic crises. The United States and the European Union have so far pumped enough political and financial capital into the situation to uphold the status quo, but they cannot maintain present levels of commitment indefinitely. The paradox is that they must significantly raise the stakes for both Israelis and Palestinians in order to salvage the peace process and keep the end goals in sight, or else admit failure and conduct a strategic disengagement.

The United States and the European

Union do not need to move far, if at all, from their established positions. The EU clearly hopes to see a permanent status agreement along the lines developed in the Camp David negotiations and Clinton parameters of 2000 and the Taba talks of early 2001; the broad vision for peace set out by Bush in his speech of 24 June 2002 does not sit uncomfortably with the EU view. There is an unusual opportunity to propel Israelis and Palestinians towards a credible peace process, but the window of opportunity will not extend much beyond the coming year unless the United States and the European Union reassert control of the peace process and demonstrate real determination to see the basic contours and parameters of their vision for peace implemented. If the window closes, the United States and the European Union must confront the reality that they will not have acted with sufficient determination and foresight to prevent the collapse of the two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

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