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## Promote Negotiations or Abandon the Two-State Solution

By Naomi Chazan

Washington DC - The opportunity which emerged after the death of Yasser Arafat, the election of Mahmoud Abbas as the new president of the Palestinian Authority, and the approval of the Sharon disengagement plan, is dissipating quickly. Unless a concerted effort is made in the next few months to resume negotiations on a permanent settlement to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, it is likely that the door will close firmly on a workable two-state option.

2005 has ushered in a period of substantial fluidity after four years of a deadly stalemate. The impetus for change has been driven by both communities: large majorities in Israel and Palestine are weary of the senseless violence that has yielded little security and no prosperity; even greater numbers are converging around the two-state solution which has fuelled all attempts to resolve the conflict to date. Indeed, in line with the Clinton proposals, the Taba talks, the Roadmap, the Arab League initiative, and the detailed Geneva model, there has been a broad consensus that the objective of the current opening is to bring an end to the occupation and to oversee the consolidation of a viable Palestinian state alongside Israel. The mechanism to achieve this goal is full-fledged negotiations leading to a final status agreement which will formally terminate the conflict.

Little, however, has been done to promote this vision or to hone the tools for its realization. The potential inherent in this brief window of opportunity has been sidetracked by the Gaza disengagement scheme—a unilateral act by the Israeli government which, while setting a precedent for withdrawal from territories and dismantling of settlements, seeks to bypass the core issues of the conflict. The international community (and primarily the United States), fearful of adversely affecting the pullback, has failed to address the strategic question of how to link the one-sided withdrawal to ongoing negotiations. The appeals emanating from the Palestinian Authority (troubled by internal tension, growing frustration and increasing challenges to its authority both from within the PLO and from the Hamas) and the severely constricted Israeli peace camp to set in motion a momentum for the day after the exit from Gaza have gone largely unheeded.

This delay may prove fatal for two obvious reasons: in an area where nothing is static, too many things can go wrong; and, in the absence of a strategic plan for the renewal of the peace process, further changes on the ground can make the prospect of an independent, contiguous and robust Palestine unfeasible. Ariel Sharon has entered into this breach with an overall strategy aimed at consolidating Israeli control over segments of the West Bank (including the large settlement blocs) and promoting a mini Palestinian state consisting of scattered enclaves—a far cry from the vision enunciated by George W. Bush in June, 2002.

The emerging Sharon Doctrine disingenuously relies on Phase II of the Roadmap, which call for a (historically unprecedented) Palestinian state with provisional boundaries (PSPB) as an interim stage en route to a permanent settlement. But

Sharon shows no signs of abandoning his unilateral approach or moving beyond it to a final status agreement. In fact, by skilfully diverting the attention of critics at home and abroad, he is fast transforming his concept of a Greater Jerusalem (which replaces the clearly impracticable notion of a Greater Land of Israel) into a reality. Through a series of stepped-up measures, including the completion of the separation wall, the development of the E1 corridor connecting Ma'aleh Adumim and Jerusalem, and the construction of a series of roads and tunnels bifurcating the West Bank, he is seeking to single-handedly predetermine the political outcome.

There are therefore now two competing interpretations of the two-state formula: Sharon's revisionist version which holds no promise of conflict resolution (and is fast assuming concrete form); and the negotiated vision embraced by the international community, the Palestinian leadership and the majority of the Israeli public. Only a small amount of time remains to alter course and to meet the challenges posed by the growing gaps between the promise of a lasting agreement and changing realities, between popular aspirations and hesitant (if not downright recalcitrant) leaders, between the urgency of the moment and long-term processes, and ultimately between success and failure accompanied by renewed violence.

The only reasonable alternative to the unilateralism inherent in the present trajectory is a coordinated, carefully calibrated strategy based on a return to the negotiating table. The first element of such a strategy is preventive: it calls for an immediate and vigorous effort by the international community to freeze Israeli initiatives in order not to prejudice future talks. The second component is proactive: it envisions the fixing of a firm date for an Israeli-Palestinian conference under international auspices (either the United States alone, the Quartet, or a coalition of global and regional actors) sometime in the fall of this year with a view to agreeing on a timetable for the commencement of negotiations on all outstanding issues.

The third ingredient is ameliorative: the encouragement of multiple (quantity is of the essence) encounters-both direct and virtual-between Israelis and Palestinians to begin to break down the layers of enmity and distrust and improve the climate during a particularly charged period. The final portion of the required strategy is innovative: the launching of a series of preliminary meetings to establish the agenda for final status talks (and perhaps reframing the issues of borders, Jerusalem, settlements and refugees along different lines in order to engender a new discourse). These track two gatherings should include civil society leaders as well as official representatives in order to expand the players and increase the possibilities for transparency and informed public debate.

Time, indeed, is running out-not only on the two-state option but also on the hopes and expectations of most Palestinians and Israelis. Only a collaborative salvage operation based on a multi-faceted strategy and a multi-layered group of actors can reverse a trend that threatens to thoroughly destabilize the region and compromise the future of all those involved. It is still in the power of those committed to a just peace to take the necessary steps now to make it happen. The alternative to a viable two-state solution by agreement is unspeakable.

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