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Loving The Two-State Solution to Death

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It didn't take long for the 'two state solution' to move from the category of radical to banal, but that is what has happened.

Today the 'two-state solution' is everyone's favorite remedy. And yet it is farther from realization than ever. Its fate may, in fact, be that rare instance of a concept being killed by kindness.

Look at what happened at the United Nations on Tuesday. The Security Council passed its first resolution on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in five years. It passed with a vote of 14-0, with Russia and China among those supporting the Bush administration's draft. (Russia, in fact, joined the United States in co- sponsoring it.)

The good news is that the resolution strongly endorses both bilateral and multilateral efforts to achieve the two-state solution - including the Arab League Initiative. With its passage, it becomes impossible for anyone to argue that the United Nations does not unambiguously support the so-called Bush vision of 'two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.'

This is all good, and it represents the kind of effort the Security Council would have taken long ago were it not for the neocons of the Bush administration. Don't forget. President Bush actually appointed John Bolton as our representative to the world body despite Bolton's antipathy for the United Nations and contempt for the peace process. Is it any wonder that it's been five years?)

But why a new resolution now? One reason is that there have been significant changes on the ground over these past five years. But, more significantly, the Bush administration is eager to burnish its Middle East legacy. A failed Iraq War and a worsening Arab-Israeli conflict will not look good in the history books.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made that motive clear when she began the debate over the resolution by contrasting the post-Bush Middle East with the Middle East President Clinton left behind. She essentially says that President Bush saved the situation.

?The situation in the Middle East is very different now from the time when President George W. Bush had entered office in 2001. At that time, the Camp David process had collapsed leaving Israelis and Palestinians in a vicious cycle of violence?. Each time a ray of hope had penetrated the darkness, it had been snuffed out by intolerance,? she said.

But then Bush came along and ?convened the Annapolis Conference, the first major peace conference in 16 years and the only one of its kind on United States soil.?

That, of course, was in November 2007, near the end of the Bush?s second term.

According to Rice, it was only after Annapolis that the Israelis and Palestinians began meeting to achieve an agreement. This is true, although it raises the question of why the administration waited seven years before getting down to business.

But beyond that, it is hard to point to any particular improvement on the ground as a result of Annapolis. In fact, the only significant improvement of any kind has been Generals Dayton and Jones? strong and effective efforts to train Palestinian security forces in the West Bank, which had nothing to do with the Annapolis meeting.

The sad fact is that the most significant Israeli-Palestinian legacy of the Bush administration is the coming to power of Hamas. Historians will have a field day when they consider that the Bush administration insisted on Palestinian elections because Natan Sharansky and his neocon friends wanted them. They actually convinced the President that elections are a good thing, in any and all situations, even if anti-democratic forces win.

This isn?t Rice?s fault. Like the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority, she is said to have warned Bush that elections could be disastrous. But the resident neocons insisted on them. Perhaps they hoped that a Hamas victory would kill the peace process or simply because, as with everything else, they just substituted wishful thinking for coherent policy. And, no big surprise, Hamas won.

As a result, we are further from implementing the two-state solution today than we were in 2001. In fact, it can?t be implemented because the Palestinians themselves constitute two states. Without Palestinian unity ? unity that ended with the Hamas election and then full seizure of power in Gaza ? the two-state solution is simply not achievable.

So the occupation continues with more settlers, more settlements, and more pain for Palestinians. Israelis endure rockets from Gaza and Gazans endure economic blockade while Corporal Shalit spends two birthdays in a cell.

This is what the UN is endorsing. What are they thinking?

They may be thinking that, with their formal endorsement of the two state solution, they will somehow lock the concept in. They may also be thinking that they are backing Binyamin Netanyahu into a corner and that, if elected prime minister of Israel, he will have no choice but to honor a UN resolution. (I expect that Netanyahu, like Livni or Barak, would seek peace with the Palestinians. But he is far less likely to be moved by anything the United Nations does, but rather by what Barack Obama wants).

The Security Council might also be thinking that this resolution will help the Palestinian Authority and weaken Hamas.

But it won't, especially because the resolution endorses the ban on any dealings with Hamas unless it agrees to the three conditions the Bush administration has insisted upon ever since it helped bring Hamas to power: Hamas must recognize the right of Israel to exist, abandon violence, and accept all previous Palestinian- Israeli agreements.

The three conditions were designed to bring Hamas down. They haven't. Even worse, they seem to have had the opposite effect. The only condition that should be insisted upon is the total and absolute end to violence. If Hamas agreed to that, it might be possible to move on to the rest. But, of course, as is the case with Iran, the Bush administration has set out conditions it knows will not be met.

The bottom line is this. The Security Council resolution's seeming endorsement of the legacy of the past eight years is, in that unfortunate phrase, a case of 'putting lipstick on a pig.'

The Obama administration needs to start fresh, and that means approaching the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with a sense of urgency the Bush administration never demonstrated.

Professor Alon Ben-Meir of New York University, a leading expert on the Middle East who has devoted his life to advancing Arab-Israeli peace, is not looking to the United Nations for more resolutions. He is looking elsewhere.

In his syndicated column, he writes:

'The Obama Administration must embrace the Arab Peace Initiative, initially adopted by the Arab League in March of 2002. First, because it represents the collective Arab will which can rein in Arab extremists, and also because only a comprehensive peace with all 22 Arab states offers Israel the security it has sought since its inception in 1948.

'The Obama Administration must persuade Israel to formally accept the Initiative, while assuring the Israelis that the United States will guarantee their security and will insist on maintaining Israel's Jewish national identity under any peace formula.

'The United States must play an active and direct role between Israelis and Palestinians by appointing a presidential envoy with a wide mandate who must stay in the region for as long as it takes until an agreement is forged.'

He also says that the United States should encourage Israel to move swiftly to wrap up an agreement with Syria. That would, by definition, increase Israel's security, and would also severely weaken Hezbollah, Hamas, and the other radicals who depend on Syria for support and military aid.

That is the way to go, not through more United Nations? resolutions that endorse peace initiatives but do little, if anything, to implement them. (The UN?s role can be critical after a deal is reached ? when it can help enforce it ? but not before).

In any case, President-elect Obama does not need lessons from George W. Bush on how to achieve Arab-Israeli peace.

There are, however, former Presidents who could offer some good advice. There is Jimmy Carter, without whom Israel would likely still be in a state of war with Egypt and who demonstrated that when it comes to Middle East peace negotiations, he not only starts the process but is a ?closer.?

And then there is Bill Clinton who brought Israelis and Palestinians closer to agreement than ever before and certainly ever since. President-elect Obama might want to talk to his Secretary of State about the near peace of 2000. She?ll remember it. And, I?d guess, she would like to help finish what President Clinton started.

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