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The dangers of a unilateral Palestine

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Many people view the prospect of creating an Arab state in the land of Palestine as nothing short of a political earthquake.

The 'Question of Palestine' has had tremendous influence across the region, and an independent Palestine would have a profound impact on regional politics, taking away one of the prime reasons given to justify abuse by some Middle East leaders. After all, it was partially in the name of the 'Palestinian question' that regimes were overthrown, that martial law was imposed and that atrocities were committed 'from Iraq's use of the Palestinian issue in partly excusing its invasion of Kuwait to Al-Qaeda's exploitation of the Palestinian situation to provoke anti-Western and anti-Israeli sentiments.

Indeed, a solution to the Palestinian struggle would have great repercussions across the region and for this reason it is important to involve other stakeholders in peace negotiations. In the absence of a strong Palestinian leadership, a peace deal that would create an independent Palestine would be anything but permanent, unless the various Arab states contribute more substantially to a long-lasting settlement. Once we move from talking about peace to implementing peace, the durability of a peace agreement will heavily depend on the degree of regional buy-in, taking into account historical as well as contemporary regional politics.

Many understand the importance of the Arab League to the peace process as the body that represents the Arab states, but what is perhaps more important is the recognition of what each individual country stands to gain or lose by such an agreement and that some of the countries should have a greater role than others in contributing to a long lasting agreement.

Jordan is one country that would be deeply impacted by a settlement and it would be wise to take a more prominent seat at the negotiation table. There are many reasons for this. On a per-capita basis, Jordan has continuously supported the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories more than any other country. For example, Jordan has been responsible for the delivery of services to the Palestinians in the West Bank, through thousands of civil servants paid directly by Jordan until the 1988 disengagement. The Jordanian government still employs hundreds of civil servants in Jerusalem, as it runs the Waqf administration, including schools.

Because of the social, geographical, religious and political links between the Jordanians and the Palestinians, any peace agreement's longevity will depend on Jordan's active engagement with the process. Many of the issues being decided, such as Jerusalem, refugees, absentee properties, water and borders, directly affect Jordan and Jordanian citizens. Ensuring Jordanian input on these topics will be vital to the success of a long-lasting peace.

By contrast, due to changing political circumstances, Egypt has over time played less of a prominent role in securing Palestinian statehood, demonstrated first at Camp David and more recently by what many Palestinians view as its collusion in enforcing the Gaza blockade. Although it remains a power to be reckoned with, the uncertainty surrounding the successor to Hosni Mubarak and the allegations that some are using the Palestinian conflict as a pawn in internal politics, have further eroded Egypt's authority among Arabs. While not divesting from participating in negotiations altogether, Egypt would do best to focus on separating the Palestinian issue from its own domestic considerations in order to recover its credibility.

Lebanon is another country that should take a more prominent role in negotiations as its internal politics and demographic balance will be substantially impacted by any Israeli-Palestinian deal. From the perspective of Lebanon's Christian majority, living in the region's only country that has a significant Christian population, it is important to ensure that the permanent solution to the Palestinian refugee problem does not contribute to the de-Christianization of the country. The proportion of Christians in Lebanon is already decreasing. Were a large number of Palestinian refugees, most of whom are Muslim, to be permanently settled in Lebanon, the proportion of Christians in the country would decline even further, thereby significantly altering the current demographic reality in Lebanon.

This scenario is also noteworthy because it could have implications for the region as a whole. Today, Lebanon and Israel are the only states in the Middle East that do not have overwhelmingly Muslim majorities. De-Christianizing Lebanon offers a resounding victory to the view that the Middle East can only sustain Muslim countries. Lebanon must therefore be represented at the negotiating table ? either directly or indirectly ? when the refugee issues are discussed.

Although the Arab League certainly has a role to play, particularly in selling a peace agreement to the Arab world through its symbolic role, it is limited in comparison to the individual regional players. They ought to take a backseat and encourage countries like Jordan and Lebanon to take on a bigger role.

Increasing Jordan's role will not be easy to achieve as it would need the support of the Egyptians, Saudis and others, who view the Hashemites as long-term pan-Arab rivals. However, this is what the Palestinians and Israelis need to ensure that any agreement they sign delivers a permanent peace.

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