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Five Reasons Why the Two-State Solution Just Won't Die

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By all accounts it's time to say a *kaddish* -- the traditional Jewish prayer for the dead -- over the idea of a Palestinian state living side by side in peace and security with Israel.

A recent article in the *National Interest*, running under the cover "[Requiem for the Two-State Promise](#) [2]," provides a compelling eulogy and funeral oration all in one. And Stephen Walt, a fellow FP contributor, once again attributing most of the ills of Western civilization to the "Israel lobby," [all but buried](#) [3] two states on his blog last week.

To paraphrase Mark Twain, signs of the two-state solution's demise aren't exaggerated.

Israeli settlement activity continues unabated. In fact, in a truly bizarre and tortuous bit of twisted logic, a recent report by a committee created by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu actually recommended sanctioning the Israeli activity.

The Palestinian national movement is deeply divided between Fatah (itself split) and Hamas, the rival ruling parties, and resembles a veritable Noah's ark, with two of everything: mini-states; constitutions, prime ministers, security services; funders, and so on. And the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority (PA) is too busy right now trying to decide whether to dig up the remains of a truly dead entity -- Yasir Arafat -- in an effort to figure out the cause of his demise. Meanwhile, back on planet Earth, Israel -- run by the deepest unity government in its history -- is unified around a coalition agreement that ensures a do-nothing approach on this issue for at least the next year.

As for U.S. President Barack Obama, well let's just say he's busy and not interested in getting

into a fight with a tough-minded Israeli prime minister over an idea whose time -- to put it mildly -- hasn't yet come.

Still, hope springs virtually eternal. Anyone truly worried about the demise of the two-state solution shouldn't be. It will live on both as an idea and maybe even a reality if Israelis and Palestinians ever get serious about paying the price and seriously negotiating a solution. And here are five reasons why.

1. An Unsustainable Status Quo

Unlike a deal with Syria over the Golan Heights, the absence of an accord with the Palestinians has always carried a real cost and urgency. Just compare the numbers of Israelis and Syrians who have died as a result of their conflict to the number of Israelis and Palestinians killed by one another since 1967 in theirs. There's simply no cost-free status quo between Israel and the Palestinians. Proximity, demography, and geography guarantee it. The two peoples are living on top of one another. Benjamin Franklin had it right: Proximity breeds children, but also contempt. Violence, anger, and frustration will only grow as occupier and occupied play out their roles in close quarters. And this means continuing terror, violence, confrontation, and repression.

That doesn't, of course, mean the Israelis and Palestinians are ready for a deal or that the two-state solution will be achieved. But the search will continue interminably -- sometimes seriously, sometimes not -- like the quest for the Holy Grail, Elvis sightings, and the search for signs of life on other planets.

2. The Least-Bad Option

Democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others, Winston Churchill famously observed. And Churchill knew something about Palestine, too. His logic is relevant. In the solution department -- and, trust me on this one, solution departments in capitals all over the world won't stop trying on Palestine -- two states is by far the least objectionable outcome. Not that it's problem- or risk-free. But the other alternatives -- the one state illusion, the Jordan option, Israel's annexation, and the status quo option -- are much worse. Whether it's just as a talking point or an actual initiative, the two-state paradigm is here to stay.

3. Israeli Politics Demands It

Just because Netanyahu may not be all that interested in a serious negotiation leading to an independent Palestinian state doesn't mean that other Israeli politicians aren't. Indeed, in his own government, the prime minister is surrounded by those who have tried to reach an accord (Defense Minister Ehud Barak) or want to (Deputy Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz). The recent acquittal of Ehud Olmert, a former prime minister who offered much better terms to Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas in 2007 and 2008 than Barak did at Camp David, in 2000, opens up the possibility of another serious two-stater returning to the Israeli political scene.

But it's not just the politicians. [Recent Israeli polls](#) ^[4] continue to show high levels of support for a two-state solution among the Israeli public. Right now, there's no urgency. Indeed, the national unity government reflects a "we don't want to be bothered with the peace process" mentality and a focus on domestic issues.

But the fact that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is in one of its manageable and less urgent phases shouldn't mask the degree to which it can get hot again, or the extent to which Israelis

are still troubled by the occupation and the international criticism it causes. Israelis consider themselves a moral people with humanistic values. And while much can be rationalized in the name of security, the occupation is at odds with that self-image. Much like the British in India, Israelis are susceptible to moral considerations, particularly those they impose on themselves. Israel needs a counternarrative, an alternate vision. And with all of its flaws, the two-state solution provides it. Forget the Palestinians -- Israelis need the idea of two states for themselves.

4. The Palestinians Are Stuck with It

Ignore all this talk about Palestinians abandoning the PA, returning the keys to the Israelis, or actively working toward a one-state solution. Palestinians are stuck with the two-state paradigm, and they know it. Since 1994, when the Gaza-Jericho agreement allowed Arafat to return to Ramallah, the Palestinians have been building the institutions and infrastructure of their putative state with the acquiescence and often grudging support of Israel and the international community. If and when Palestinian statehood is ever achieved, Salam Fayyad, the Palestinian prime minister, will deserve much of the credit for actually constructing the framework of a state even while negotiations remain at an impasse. It's a gamble, to be sure, but one based on a line from one of Kevin Costner's better movies, *Field of Dreams*: Build it, and -- who knows? -- maybe they will come.

Which is not to say that Palestinians are optimistic. That state-building effort has been going on in various forms for nearly 20 years now. An entire generation of young Palestinians in the West Bank and even in Gaza has grown up with the Israeli occupation, but also with the strange phenomenon of state-building too. There's deep ambivalence here. Earlier this year, Palestinian pollster Khalil Shikaki [found](#) ^[5] that 45 percent of Palestinians believed that their first and most vital goal should be ending Israel's occupation and building a Palestinian state. At the same time, 68 percent felt that chances for establishment of such a state in the next five years were slim to nonexistent.

The center of gravity in the Palestinian community has now shifted, probably irrevocably, from the diaspora to Palestine, with hopes and aspirations forcibly scaled back. Even in Gaza, the religious manifestation of Palestinian nationalism -- Hamas -- rules over a stable polity and has seen its own visionary goals tempered by the realities of governance and its shrinking options in the Arab world. With Bashar al-Assad's Syria melting down and Iran under pressure, Hamas's external leadership finds itself without a good home -- a development that only reinforces the one the internal leadership already controls in Gaza. It's the irony of ironies that even with the peace process in a coma, the Palestinian leadership's default position is -- you guessed it -- efforts to gain recognition at the U.N. for a Palestinian state.

5. Too Big to Fail or Succeed

Without hope and perhaps illusions, there's no life. A Palestinian state might never be born, but it's unlikely to die anytime soon, either. Too many folks in too many places have a stake in keeping the idea alive and working to make it a reality. Let's not forget that we're talking about the Holy Land here: Jerusalem remains the center of the world for millions of Muslims, Christians, and Jews. This isn't some backwater operation in Africa or the 'Stans. A great many people care about this issue and are simply unwilling or unable to admit that peace in the much- too-promised land might not be possible.

Despite my own annoyingly negative take, solutionists the world over won't let this one go.

That includes one Barack Obama, who two days after his inauguration appointed a presidential envoy to work the problem. Should he gain a second term, the president won't be able to resist playing the peacemaker (how serious or successful he'll be is another matter).

So, solutionists and peace processors everywhere: Don't despair. The peace process is like rock and roll -- it's never going to die. And it will be back. And when it does return, standing at the center of it all will be the much maligned, much hoped for, and much overpromised two-state solution.

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