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## What is to be done between now and 2SS?

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### What is to be done between now and 2SS?

Dr. Ziad Asali, president and founder of the American Task Force on Palestine, provides remarks at "Looking Back, Looking Forward - 100 Years of the Arab-Israeli Conflict" at the Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University.

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There is no two-state solution, or one-state solution nor any kind of solution at this point in time. What we have is Palestinian-Israeli status quo which has been sloping downward for decades. Instead of peace, we have a peace process and instead of solutions we have steadily diminishing prospects of solutions. Barring an intervention, the present trajectory will slide till there is no process and no solution.

I will briefly address the historical factors that have blocked both the one-state solution and the two-state solution.

When the PLO was established in 1964, it called for a democratic state of Palestine for all people in the historic land of Palestine. That was a one-state-solution. That goal survived the 1967 war, Khartoum Declaration, Black September, the 1973 war, Palestinian militant organized hegemony over Lebanon, Palestinian armed struggle against Israel, border wars, PLO confrontations with Syria, its expulsion to Tunis and its remote control over the Intifada. Reality, harsh and unavoidable, forced the PLO to accept a two-state solution when it proclaimed the Palestinian Declaration of Independence in Algeria in 1988. This opened the door for its negotiated return to the West Bank and Gaza in 1993. Abandoning one-state and acceptance of a two-state solution was the ultimate Palestinian concession after a series of setbacks. Just for the record, Nasser officially accepted the same by accepting the Rogers plan based on two-states on July 23, 1970.

Those who now call for one-state solution have seemingly deleted all that history. Perhaps

they think that Israel is weaker or that the Palestinians and Arab allies are stronger than they used to be vis-à-vis Israel. One-state solution is unachievable without the consent of Israel in the context of the existing regional and global power structure. Mobilizing all the resources and means to up-end the realities of global and regional power will cause disruptions that will make the very concept of the two people coexisting in one state unrealizable.

The one-state solution sounds good in theory, gratifying like a pleasant dream. It comprises elements of justice, equality, universal values and everlasting peace. It is, however, disconnected from the realities of power and disparities of knowledge, skills and means. It is innocent of the experience of the need to overcome cultural, religious, educational, economic and technological disparities if stability is to be sustained. It heeds no lessons of civil wars and Jim Crow laws that subjugated minorities and deprived them from full equality. It flies in the face of the Palestinian and Israeli national narratives and their respective quests to live in their own state and normalize their relations with their own people, neighbors, the region and the world. Equality is an aspirational goal of the one-staters but it is not a realizable goal. The one-state solution is a Palestinian abdication of their political right as a people and a negation of the Jewish state.

### **Where do we go from here?**

Let us start by acknowledging forthrightly that there are many actors on all sides who benefit from the status-quo and its trajectory. They have used and will use any means to sustain it by pursuing a zero-sum fight to the finish.

Not a single 'Final Status Issue' has been resolved after decades of negotiations. In the meantime Palestinian land available for a state shrinks relentlessly.

The Palestinian president elected for a four-year term in 2005 is still serving his 13th year in office. The Legislative Council which not convened for the past decade was elected in 2006 is split between the West Bank and Gaza. The PA, whose writ barely reaches a few cities, continues to be dependent on foreign aid runs a dysfunctional underfunded bureaucracy whose best functional department is the security apparatus that coordinates with Israel and the U.S. government. Health, education, energy, transportation and legal systems are all underfunded and mismanaged. The economy is in shambles as is political freedom, freedom of the press and cultural life. Israeli-issued VIP cards define the Palestinian elite. The PA serves a symbolic purpose of making annual trips to the UN that provide the legitimizing photos and fiery speeches that express the obligatory 'Palestinian Constants' regarding Jerusalem, borders, refugees and Right of Return with perennial threats to dissolve itself or withhold security cooperation with Israel. The international donor community keeps the PA afloat.

Gaza under Hamas has been an independent polity for a decade with the people impoverished and under siege. It scrambles for handouts from regional donor countries seeking to own a piece of Palestine or the cause of Palestine. Hamas government lacks the ability to deliver the minimum services that the public desperately needs. Prospects for Palestinian-Palestinian reconciliation are conditioned upon the wishes of outside sponsors. This status quo is unsustainable and Palestinian citizens must have their rights protected by their institutions.

Israel also is a divided polity. It's duly re-elected Prime Minister who served for almost a decade has steadily moved policy to the right, away from compromise and towards settlement

expansion, which no political force in Israel has been able to stop. Israel keeps a tight hold over the population of the West Bank while outsourcing slices of security and civil management to the PA.

Israel is a military powerhouse. It has never had a better economy, with flourishing industry, trade, education, services, scientific and technological advances, social, cultural and artistic boon with ever improving foreign relations. It recently expanded its regional relations while watching the Palestinian issue sink lower on the regional and international agenda. However, Israel has ethnic, religious, economic and social issues. Its deviations from universal liberal western values of equality have adversely impacted its image. But these issues do not seem to have slowed down the country's drift to the right.

Israelis are quite aware of the emergence of the Islamic movement among Arab Israelis as they are of the opposing trend of a growing secular movement.

Normalization is a two-way street. There is nothing normal about life under occupation. Occupation touches and permeates all aspects of Palestinian public and private lives with an arbitrariness that interrupts people's plans and functions. It is the absence of elemental freedom. Palestinians are starving for normalization that they call an end to occupation.

Israelis too seek normalization. It is a public need, a state need, a political and a psychological need to live in security and safety, free of terror attacks and from the stigma of occupation, exclusion and boycott.

The two-state solution seems to offer all of that for both people who seek normalization. But policy makers, politicians and scholars have failed for decades to come up with a workable alternative to the two-state solution. It has other alternatives but not alternative solutions.

***However, the obstacles in its way are formidable and deeply entrenched.***

A segment of both people has a built-in conviction that explains their deep hostility to the other side after a century of escalating violence over land and property. The conflict has metamorphosed into an ethnic, religious, racial and civilizational conflict. Each party fulfilled the other's worst expectation. A segment of the Jewish Israeli community is convinced that their enemies' violent hostility is an unavoidable consequence of something uniquely or structurally wrong with Palestinians, Arabs in general and Muslims broadly. This is mirrored by some Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims who hold the pervasive idea that there is something inherently bad or malicious about Jews or Israelis that makes them oppressive, merciless and expansionists. This '**essentialism**' overrides any other definition of 'the other' and precludes reason or compromise. In short, both victimized people feel that their enemies are especially wicked because they victimize a victim. Such people have devalued and dehumanized the other and locked horns in a zero-sum fight to the finish.

These kinds of perceptions of the 'real character' of the other foreclose and block compromise. Public policy and public discourse impact and are greatly impacted by such views and practices. Political careers and populist movements are built around them.

Truth is, Israelis are divided as are the Palestinians. Any generalization about either people is to be viewed with great skepticism. In real life and in their daily interactions they manage to find ways to co-exist, function and lead as normal lives as best as they can.

The local fragmented and insulated pre-industrial Palestinian Middle Easterners were never a match for Jewish European immigrants who were victims as well as beneficiaries of a far more advanced and competitive European civilization. In a total fight over a century there was a winner and a loser but there is no peace.

***There are several issues worth noting about Israel of today:***

1) Israel is a military, industrial, economic, and technological powerhouse that competes in the upper tiers of the global arena. It has succeeded in creating a western country in the Middle East.

2) Israel by and large is a country of laws and institutions with a wide middle class and a population committed to the State and its defense. Under different circumstances it could have been a model for other countries in the region to emulate.

3) The present rising right wing trend in Israel parallels a similar trend in the U.S. among a segment of American voters. On the other hand there is a globalist shift in the youth of America, including many in academia, business and the media.

4) There is a strand in Israeli thinking that perceives Palestinians as fickle, unreliable and incapable of being partners. Putting aside the merit of this '**essentialist**' concern, it reveals Israel's lack of confidence in the durability of any negotiated agreement. Obviously there is a symmetrical Palestinian opposing view. These mindsets present a serious obstacle to reaching an agreement.

5) Israel has managed to hold on to Palestinian land it occupied in 1967. Generations of Palestinians were born and live under Israeli occupation. An Israeli debate about the future of the disadvantaged, undereducated and unemployed Palestinian youth has not moved seriously beyond security concerns towards developing a long-term strategy.

6) Secular socialist founders of Israel and religious extremists who led the settlement expansionist movement after 1967 and 1973 manage to coexist as they disagree. There is no present Israeli consensus on demographics, citizenship, Jerusalem or national borders. Absence of a national consensus regarding the character and future of the state dims the prospects of peace negotiations.

7) The Arab Spring impacted the region and its people greatly. A favorable wind is blowing towards Tel Aviv from several Gulf and other Arab capitals with prospects of a tectonic shift to collectively realign against Iran. Some in Israel view this as an opportunity to achieve a solution to the Palestine issue as part of a general regional reconciliation while others view it as an opportunity for regional reconciliation that marginalizes or ignores Palestine. There is a symmetrical and opposite split on the Palestinian, Arab and Muslim side. It might be that Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa Mosque are more significant than Palestine.

***Other issues worth following on the Palestinian side:***

1) A narrative of victimization and injustice led to a series of defeats, Nakba of 1948 and Naksa of 1967, not acknowledged as defeats but setbacks and retreats, gave permanence to transience and dependency. Being part of an Arab or Muslim nation was considered a shield and rescue that turned out after several wars to be neither. Palestinian self-determination

which became a meaningful concept only after 1967 can now be viewed in the context of a grossly asymmetrical power equation.

2) Skeletal government services and a '*fauda*' political system have contributed to preclude meaningful negotiations and played a role in continuing the present sloping status quo. Remnants of the PLO and the PA serve an important function of keeping Palestine alive as a national rather than a refugee issue. Their main present role is in providing a security force and minimal services to keep Palestinians under control. However, these institutions keep the two-state solution viable.

3) Current leadership lacks the political or moral authority to make compromises on the 'Final Status Issue' negotiated over the past several decades. All are labeled 'Palestinian Constants' to be delivered by someone: the U.S., the International Community, the Arabs, or perhaps fancifully, a new Israeli government ready for concessions.

4) Settlement building has relentlessly swallowed up the ever-shrinking space for the future Palestinian state. Call for a one state indicates in part despair of the viability of a Swiss-cheese one. It also expresses the genuine view of some who dream of future coexistence and equal citizenship as the PLO originally hoped.

5) The geographically and politically divided Palestinian polity includes an entity in Gaza run by Hamas. There are no clean hands on the issue of Gaza and none of its tunnels leads to light at the end. The rest of the world including the USA, the Arabs and Muslims are presently overwhelmed and pre-occupied with complex issues but, despite all claims to the contrary, this conflict about the Holy Land will continue to get attention. Its priority on the international agenda ebbs and flows, but it persists because of religion.

### **So, once again, where do we go from here?**

***I will be frank.*** Current regional and geopolitical circumstances could not be less conducive to conflict resolution. Neither party has the credibility, the political standing or will to resolve final status issues. Therefore, we must search for a more achievable and less ambitious goal. Absence of a negotiated conflict-ending solution does not mean ending negotiations. The opposite is true. The time has come to seek a policy focused on removing the impediments that made a negotiated deal unreachable. This policy is not about an interim agreement or precluding any future option and it is time limited. Let us call it "***What can be done during the transition phase.***" The two parties cannot do it by themselves, even if they wanted to. Only the U.S. has what it takes to oversee this phase. Allied sponsors must insist on being part of this oversight system.

Once the hard decision to postpone final-status negotiations is made, all efforts must focus on this transition. This means that ***good governance*** must top the agenda to build Palestinian infrastructure. Beautifying the occupation is an odious concept but providing safety and better living conditions across the board is an empowering noble objective. The objectives of this phase would be to prioritize good governance, to implement rule of law, build accountable institutions and services, provide jobs, expand the economy and to enhance trade cooperation and mobility. Palestinian self-empowerment is a prerequisite for future stability. With all due respect, donors and underwriters of this phase must insist that mechanisms are in place for the international community to oversee projects and progress at this transition phase and hold them to the highest standards of accountability and transparency. The short-lived infrastructure building program of former Prime Minister Fayyad was showered with praise

and accolades but hobbled by lack of political and financial support. However, it provided a prototype.

**Transition Phase, the infrastructure building phase**, is meant to impact Palestinian lives as well as Palestinian and Israeli politics. The single most effective weapon against terrorism is good governance with good education as its top priority. Occupation is incompatible with long-term stability. The very word **normalization** is reviled by many Palestinians, Arabs and Islamists who consider it surrender and betrayal. However, normalization is a two-way street. To put it bluntly, Palestinians do not lead normal lives under occupation and they would be the main beneficiaries of normalization. Israelis on the other hand will not lead normal lives and continue the occupation.

For both Palestinians and Israelis normalization will mean ending coercive, arbitrary and humiliating contacts. It means living within institutions that guard the lawful rights of all citizens of each polity.

Having a better economy, health, technology and educational institutions are not peripheral issues to be shelved till they are resolved after final-status negotiations. The objectives, timelines, ways and means of the Transition Phase must be negotiated with oversight by the international community to enhance the future prospects of successful final status negotiations phase.

Finally, the Arab Spring has dramatically changed the region. We must examine the new regional realities and their impact on this conflict. Past assumptions and policies cloud the view of options and solutions offered by these new regional realities. Conflicts and problems of all states in the region are interconnected, because everyone plays in everybody else's court. Terrorism will wreak more havoc before it is defeated. Strategic solutions including a Middle East Security Regime equivalent to NATO to stabilize the region remain visions to be realized. Events and alliances across the region can and do intersect, including with Israel and Palestine.

Historic statesmen of vision and vigor are yet to carve out a peaceful future for this region of turmoil.

*Ziad J. Asali*

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