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Living with a sloping status quo for 50 years

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It seemed like the original Arab-Jewish conflict came with two bookends. The first fell into place in 1948. The crushing defeat of the Arabs in 1967 should have been the second, but it was not. The Khartoum Resolution of the Arab Summit of September 1967 issued the famous three Arab “No’s”: No peace, no recognition and no negotiations with Israel until its forces withdraw from Arab lands occupied on June 5.

Palestinians did not sign on to the resolution, and the requested withdrawal applied only to Arab lands occupied in 1967. The past 50 years of war-making and peace-making have witnessed a steady evolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict into a Palestinian-Israeli political process, with Palestinians and Israelis the principal antagonists.

The situation was further complicated by the emergence of jihadism, which mushroomed across the region as a potent resistance force by Islam’s two competing identities, Sunni and Shiite. Islamists precipitated a Palestinian geographic and political split before and after Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza.

The second bookend that should have ended the conflict yielded to the reality of an ever-lowering ceiling of a two-state solution. The lesson we all can agree on is that neither war nor negotiations have resolved the conflict. Familiarity with the talent of those who have tried to resolve this issue over five decades teaches all aspirants that humility and patience are in order. There are no quick fixes.

New tools to deal with the new realities

We can no longer afford to go on using the same 50-year-old arguments to deal with this intractable conflict. It has plummeted down the regional agenda, and a more realistic assessment of the evolving power equation is in order. Drastic changes have impacted the regional balance of power, and we need new tools to deal with the new realities.

It is easier to start with Israel. The weak, vulnerable and needy state of Israel of 1948 has expanded, consolidated and built a regional powerhouse through decades of war and peace. It is now a regional superpower guaranteed to have a qualitative military edge, and a global technological superpower. It also has one of the most agile global political networks, including within the Middle East. In short, a most successful model of modern nation-building.

However, Israel has yet to resolve problems of its citizens' equality, tensions between religious and secular identities, and reaching anything close to a consensus on dealing with the Palestinians and the land it occupied in 1967.

Its political system is fractious and contentious, and it cedes veto power on peace to the powerful forces that maintain the ever-descending slope of the status quo. Within its present polity, it defers making strategic decisions, not just because they are hard but because it cannot. Hence it does not feel compelled to reach decisions on making concessions at the right moments.

Devaluing and dehumanizing Palestinians

It is hard to deny that devaluing and dehumanizing Palestinians whenever they come in contact with the Israeli state is policy. The logic, I am told, is that “they have to know who is boss.” Occupation, with all the deprivations it imposes and with no hope of light at the end of the tunnel, is incompatible with stability or peace.

Incitement, fanning prejudice and xenophobia are the operative policies of both Israel and the Palestinians. Leaders bend to the wind of populist victimization narratives, but our times call for statesmen and stateswomen who must lead their people to compromise for a better future.

Israel’s will cannot be broken by war or violence. The pressure to have it accept a historic compromise can only come from strategic considerations that Israelis find compelling. Answers must be provided to the big questions about land and people in a secure and stable future. It is precisely this space that opens the prospect of exiting the zero-sum-game mentality into establishing a cooperative, coordinated path to build a new, open Middle East.

Palestinian achievement during the past 50 years has been the transformation of their cause from one of refugees to one of a national identity that seeks a state on its homeland. It has for decades captured global attention and the imagination of those who view the Palestinian cause as one of justice and liberation.

The Middle East needs a regional strategic solution, much as Europe needed

by the US and allies with a regionally funded Marshall Plan.

Dr. Ziad J. Asali

As with most in the Middle East, Palestinians were barely cognizant of what was happening in Europe before, during and after the world wars, and were never equipped to deal with a modern European movement such as Zionism, nor with the state of Israel or its supporters and allies.

Palestine/Israel is the world's richest issue in symbolism because it has a whole spectrum of conflicts packed in a tiny "holy" land: Religion, race, ethnicity, north vs south, east vs west, brown vs white, colonial vs colonized, haves vs have-nots, scientific vs metaphysical and strong vs weak. It sits at the crossroads between continents and civilizations. It also happens to be too close to the world's largest deposits of energy.

Need for committed leadership

Governing under occupation while dependent on foreign aid requires a sophisticated, committed leadership. Such leadership would be fully aware that the pursuit of independence is incompatible with corruption. The sum total of the Palestinian experience in the last 50 years has been militancy met with defeat, which ultimately led to splintering into two ideologically, politically and geographically divided polities. Both entities are dependent on external subsidy.

A negotiated deal about final-status issues between Israel and one or both such partners is farcical at present. What is possible, however, is negotiations about managing a period of transition to detoxify and ameliorate the multitude of factors that preclude agreements now.

There is no Palestine on the map. Geographically fractured and politically fractious, Palestine is free of elementary requisites of a state, including freedom and state monopoly of the use of force. Practical burdens of the occupation fall disproportionately on the people rather than their elite. Peace cannot be achieved until the Palestinians have a leadership that can deliver.

Those who earnestly seek a solution should take a break from negotiating final-status issues and focus on negotiating a finite transition period that will improve the quality of Palestinian lives and institutions. This is what it will take to keep the viability of a solution. Occupation, dictatorship, poverty, humiliation, injustice and hopelessness breed terrorists and victims, not citizens. Palestinian citizens of Israel are not rebelling.

Fractured Palestinian polity

The Palestinian polity, headed by the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas, is fractured beyond hope. Its upper limit of competence is to keep security and safety under an Israeli security umbrella and to sustain the miserable, down-sloping status quo for the Palestinians. Good governance demands accountability, which will not be volunteered. The donor community needs to demand it. It has not.

With the passage of time, the disparity between Israelis and Palestinians increases. Time is the enemy of this deal. Final-status issues dominated the substance of negotiations for decades. Meanwhile, the degradation of Palestinians' daily lives continued, and the bulk of their economy remains dependent on funding from international donors and trade with Israel. The peace process has not just predictably and repetitively failed, it has consistently stunted the budding infrastructure-building project as it crushed economic development.

Palestinian presidential elections have not taken place since 2005, and parliamentary elections not since 2006. Opening up political space, freedom of speech, formation of political parties and good governance should be a demand by the international community, which funds the PA. Only a prolonged and vigorous campaign can shake the monopoly of Fatah and Hamas, and make an accountable and stable government possible.

No counterterrorism measure is more effective than good governance. It is about time for serious international or bilateral deals that demand and provide oversight to deliver good governance, establish competent and accountable institutions, and build up the economy and education as a national project worthy of consideration in and of itself, outside the final-status track.

Palestinian-Israeli peace process

By closing the chapter on the aftermath of the 1973 war, it was clear that strategic Arab-Israeli wars have come to an end. The Palestinian-Israeli peace process was in full bloom, but Palestine continued to be the primary Arab cause in the ensuing decades. The Arab people sacrificed for years in the name of Palestine, but with the eruption of the Arab Spring, the Arab agenda of today is stacked with demands ahead of Palestine.

But Palestine's symbolic significance cannot be wished away from people's consciousness. In political and practical terms, the region's problems today are intertwined, so those of any single state cannot be solved in isolation.

Except for most Gulf states and a few others, the Arab Spring left its world in shambles. New thinking and ideas that would tear down the constraints of the past are needed to cope with the aftermath. Old barriers must be broken, and new internal and external bridges must be built. This has already begun.

An intervention is in order. Unless a regional regime led by the US provides security, multiple sources of energy and stability with massive industrialization, land reclamation and technological education, the Middle East will march on to its present perilous trajectory. Palestine and Israel can be part of this security regime.

The Middle East needs a regional strategic solution, much as Europe needed one after World War II. A new Middle East security regime can only be led by the US and allies with a regionally funded Marshall Plan.

There is still no Palestine

Despite all the life-altering changes in the Middle East over the past 50 years, one thing has not changed: There is still no Palestine. The occupied must look for other ways out. The donor community must insist on accountability and good governance to allow for the formation of political parties and campaigning long enough to lead to free and fair elections.

Negotiating with Israel and the international community will be vastly more meaningful if it focuses for a defined period on building state institutions and infrastructure to improve Palestinians' quality of life.

The international community can be especially helpful by asking Israel to drastically expand mobility, and commercial and educational connections consistent with its security requirements. This phase would be a prerequisite to final-status, conflict-ending negotiations.

This is about leadership that is willing to mobilize people to link up and fight for an epoch-ending and epoch-making compromise, beyond the victimization narrative toward a Middle East open to all its citizens. The real fight is between those who share this vision and those who oppose it.

Dr. Ziad J. Asali is the founder and president of the American Task Force on Palestine (ATFP), a non-

state solution.

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