

Can a two-state solution survive Olmert's resignation?

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For the first time in the history of Israel, a plan for a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict was put forward by one of the country's right-wing leaders, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. The plan would have Israel annex 7 percent of Palestinian territory in the West Bank, for which Palestinians would be compensated with 5.5 percent of Israeli territory adjoining the Gaza Strip and a land corridor linking Gaza and the West Bank.

Olmert's proposals came at a point when he was being forced to resign as prime minister because of charges leveled against him by Israel's police, although he remains in a caretaker role until a new government is formed. But it would not have gone anywhere even if he stayed in office.

Olmert's plan is silent on whether Israel will allow Palestinians to locate the capital of their state in East Jerusalem. It demands that Palestinians relinquish the right of their refugees to return to their homes in Israel, and that the accord be a "shelf-agreement," to be implemented at a time to be determined by Israel - but in any event not before Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas will have expelled Hamas from Gaza.

The proposal has convinced Sari Nuseibeh, president of Birzeit University, that Palestinian expectations for a two-state solution are a chimera. One of the most moderate of Palestinian leaders, Dr. Nuseibeh is the author of a set of principles for an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, called the People's Initiative, that he and Ami Ayalon, a former chief of Israel's Shin Bet, sought to promote among Israelis and Palestinians. Risking his life, Nuseibeh visited Palestinian refugee camps to urge its residents to accept the impossibility of Israel allowing them back into the Jewish state.

In an interview in Ha'aretz, Dr. Nuseibeh noted that however important the return of refugees to Israel is for Palestinians, more important for them - and for Muslims all over the world - is Jerusalem. "It is the issue over which the most extremist of refugees will be willing to make a sacrifice," Nuseibeh said. But if this is the issue over which Olmert and Abbas are in disagreement, he told his interviewer, there is no hope for a two-state solution, and this hopelessness leaves Palestinians with no other choice but to strive from now on for a single-state solution.

The expectation in Washington that even if Olmert's proposals had not led to a full agreement, they would have produced parameters for such an agreement before President Bush leaves office exposes the total disconnect between policy and realities on the ground that for so long has marked U.S. Middle East peace efforts. The U.S. assumption that after swallowing Israel's rejection of a Palestinian right of return and an indeterminate delay in negotiations over the future of Jerusalem - not to speak of their loss of 7 percent of territory in the Palestinian heartland - Palestinians would agree to placing their new state "on a shelf," defines the hollowness of U.S. peace diplomacy.

Even if such a proposal were accepted by Abbas (he and his advisors have already dismissed it as “worthless”), what conceivable value could such an agreement have if nearly half of the Palestinian population - the residents of Gaza - is denied a role in its negotiation, ratification, and implementation? If nothing else, the requirement that Abbas must bring down Hamas before the plan can be implemented guarantees it will not happen. Furthermore, Israel’s leaders and Bush have put Abbas on notice that should he seek reconciliation with Hamas in order to reconstitute a national unity government, they will cut him off at the knees by bringing their recently resumed economic assistance to an abrupt end.

Parenthetically, Olmert and Bush need not have worried about a Fatah-Hamas reconciliation. Abbas permitted Fatah - the party he heads that was defeated in 2006 by Hamas in what was arguably the first truly democratic election in any Arab country - to refuse to relinquish power to Hamas. He encouraged Israel and the U.S. in their efforts to overthrow the party that was given the mandate to govern by a clear majority of the Palestinian people.

The folks in Jerusalem, Ramallah and Washington whose staggering incompetence and political cowardice have helped bring us to the current disastrous impasse in the conflict will not produce a breakthrough in the remaining days of their lame-duck rule. Given the pandering speeches before AIPAC, the pro-Israel lobby, by both presidential candidates, the prospect that either one of them will do so is equally dim.

A two-state solution can be rescued only if the next U.S. president will understand that it is not an act of friendship to the Jewish state or the Jewish people to support policies of an Israeli government that spell Israel’s end as a democratic or Jewish state. Nothing in the pre-election pronouncements of John McCain or Barak Obama indicates that either one is likely to act on that understanding.

A U.S. initiative that goes beyond the failed “facilitation” of previous administrations to vigorous and determined diplomacy can still end this conflict, and thereby strengthen America’s ability to deal with many of the other major challenges it faces in the region. Only a president whose political and moral horizon extends beyond the next U.S. Congressional election - and understands that by the time that election occurs, the two-state solution may well have disappeared - can bring this multi-generational tragedy to an end.

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