

Israel-Palestine Stalemate: Old Models for Conflict Resolution No Longer Realistic

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Middle East Conflicts, all linked to one another, are getting out of hand and becoming resistant to any external mediation. The United States is seemingly displaying a new-found interest in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict after the failed attempt of 2009. President Obama seems to be behind these efforts, as he certainly would like to leave a positive “legacy” of involvement in the Middle East. However, he may be underestimating the difficulty of the task at hand after the upheavals brought about by the “Arab Spring” and overestimating U.S. influence in the Middle East, especially after the upheavals brought about by the “Arab Spring.” More than ever, local and regional dynamics, not external mediators, are dictating the magnitude and direction of change. The simple and obstinate fact is that the greatest obstacle to peace today is not differences of opinion on the scope of a balanced agreement between Arabs and Israelis but the behaviour of internal political forces on both sides. These are currently making any kind of agreement impossible and are increasingly impervious to the either U.S. or other influences.

The ‘sudden’ eruption of hostilities in Gaza two week ago is symptomatic of this problem and illustrates its murky dimensions of the problem. As usual, Israel has justified the new outbreak by asserting its “right to self-defence” and the need to improve its capacity to deter and reduce the military capabilities of its opponent. As usual in Israeli-Arab armed conflicts, there were a strikingly higher number of casualties on the Palestinian side. The Palestinians have underlined on several occasions that Israel’s use of “house demolitions” as a military tactic is a blatant violation of international law and constitutes collective punishment against the Palestinian civilian population. The Palestinians too insist that they have the right to show “resistance” to an enemy, defend their “honour” and rights and ask for “justice.” Once again, the international community has urged both sides to exercise the utmost restraint and fully respect their obligations under international humanitarian law. However, with these demands the main regional players are merely paying mere lip service to Israelis and Palestinians’ international responsibilities. They are also not taking into account changes which have occurred in the last few years and make previous rhetoric redundant.

The uncompromising but complex nature of the domestic policies now being pursued in both Israel and occupied territories is one of these changes, but there are others. The threat of a massive attack from Arab armies, which once hung over Israel, has faded over the past few decades. Israeli concerns about a possible “surprise attack” are not longer valid, and therefore the need to occupy territories to establish buffer zones and use them as bargaining chips during negotiation. Actually, these territories have become a millstone for Israel.

Two intifadas and several short wars of marginal benefit, including two in Lebanon (1982, 2006) and two in Gaza (2008, 2012), suggest that the threats to Israel’s survival are more

complex than the perception Israeli leaders have of them. Israel's fixation on territorial expansion serves badly its cause, although one could argue that the growth of Israeli settlements is due to Palestinians' hesitation – or complete refusal – to negotiate a treaty with Israel. Delaying talks means that Palestinians will negotiate for a smaller piece of land. With the advent of short and mid-range missiles, distance from the enemy, in the military sector, has notionally shrunk to virtual nothingness. Palestinian militants could target Israel's commercial capital Tel Aviv with missiles fired from the Gaza Strip. Fortunately for Israel, its missile defense system managed to neutralize much of these short-range missiles.

Three major factors have altered the strategic landscape. First, demographic trends detrimental to Israel could cause Jews to become a minority in their own country before long. This would make most Jews nervous and unsure about their position in the Israel established as their homeland. Control of the occupied territories exacerbates this threat. That's why former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon orchestrated Israel's unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2004-05. At the same time, Israel cannot afford to countenance "unmanaged areas" adjacent to its recognised pre-1967 territory, as these could be infiltrated by extremists and trigger clashes at any time.

Second, the radicalisation and islamisation (via groups such as Hamas) of the Palestinian opposition, previously secular and represented by the Palestinian Authority, have seriously changed the political equation for Israel. The Salafists, Jihadists and self-proclaimed members of the "resistance front", which includes Hezbollah, Syria and Iran, are now in a position to exacerbate long held antagonisms by sponsoring groups (such as the Islamic Jihad) or providing sophisticated weapons, including short-range and – maybe soon – mid-range missiles.

Third, Iran's acquisition of nuclear bombs and long-range missiles (most likely from North Korea) would threaten to disrupt an already fragile strategic balance in the region. At the very least, the atomic bomb being in the hands of the Iranians will force Israel and other regional and international stakeholders to review their current calculations of strategic advantage, state alliances and nuclear retaliation scenarios. Some observers saw Israel's military operations against Gaza in 2008 and 2012 primarily as attempts to deter Iran as much as Hamas from attacking Israeli territory, deterrence being defined as attempts to manipulate a target's behaviour through conditional threats.

Where are we now? The prospects of achieving a two-state solution are becoming ever more remote, while the desire to embark on a new peace process has weakened in the aftermath of the November events. However, the Arab Spring has also created new opportunities which could lead to new solutions. Israeli strategists would do well to understand this and give up conducting periodic "operations" which inflate bitterness on both sides, while leave the conflict still unresolved. The idea that giving the process more time will help build mutual confidence and respect between the different actors is illusory. Pursuing such a course further complicates an already unworkable relationship.

Domestic factors prevent Israeli and the Palestinian actors from constructively changing the situation on the ground. For example, the fact that Hamas (considered a terrorist organisation by Israel and the United States) now refuses to accept the idea or validity of

the two-state solution has transformed a difficult but resolvable territorial conflict into an eternal ideological one.

In the absence of courageous political leadership, only a serious upheaval or crisis could shake up, here and there, rigid political configurations now prevailing on both territories and discard the belief that old solutions will somehow bring an end to the conflict. Perhaps next year the international crisis expected as a result of the Iranian nuclear program will bring about salutary changes in this 64-year-old conflict.

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