

Is the two-state solution still alive?

PARLEY

Given the unity of the Palestinians as well as practical impediments, the solution is not viable

The 11-day fighting between Hamas and Israel, coupled with protests across the Palestinian territories and Israeli cities, has turned the spotlight once again on the Palestine question. The internationally accepted solution to this crisis is the so-called two-state solution. This would mean that an independent, sovereign Palestine state and an independent, sovereign Israeli state would coexist in peace. But on the ground, since the Oslo Accords were signed, there has been little progress on the two-state solution and Israel has only tightened its occupation of Palestine over the years. In a conversation moderated by Stanly Johny, Nathan Thrall and A.K. Ramakrishnan discuss the past, present and future of the Palestine question. Edited excerpts:

The most recent phase of the Israel-Palestine crisis was more than the bombing of and rockets from Gaza. There were also protests from the Gaza Strip through the Israeli cities to East Jerusalem and West Bank. How do you look at this development?

Nathan Thrall: This [escalation] was rather different from the escalations that we saw in Gaza in 2014, 2012, 2009 and 2008. The Palestinian citizens of Israel protested in large numbers and they're being arrested in large numbers today. That is something that occurred during the First Intifada. At the beginning of the Second Intifada, when what Israel calls "the October events" took place, 13 Palestinian citizens of Israel were killed in protests. So, there is a precedent for this. But it did feel different from the escalations of the last decade or so. It sent a clear message to the world and much of the Israeli public that after over 70 years of Israeli policy to fragment the Palestinian people, treat them differently, and subject them to different rules and restrictions, the Palestinian citizens of Israel and the Palestinian people at large are one.

This is an enormous challenge to the existing paradigm of the international community, the two-state solution. Most of the world has treated the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as though it's more or less a dispute over

the occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza. The paradigm has been more or less that of a border dispute. But when the Palestinian people come together and show that the Palestinians of the West Bank, Jerusalem and Gaza are just one part of the Palestinian people and this is a national struggle of all the Palestinian people who are still united as one, that paradigm starts to make a lot less sense.

If you look at it from the point of view of the Palestinian people, or from a historical point of view, we can argue that the two-state solution doesn't make sense. But practically, what do you think can be done?

A.K. Ramakrishnan: What is significant is to recognise that from 1967 onwards, Palestinian territories have been under Israeli control. And that is where the narrative has to change from two entities fighting against each other for a particular piece of land to the very conception of a colonial order. If the reality of the coloniser-colonised equation is recognised, one can think about what solution is possible.

And in addressing that aspect of resolving the conflict, this recognition of the complete control of Israel is the first step. But that's precisely what is being resisted by the Israeli government. Most of the peace processes that we have seen are mechanisms for postponing any kind of permanent settlement of the issue. So, that's why there is a dead end to the peace process, because it's not driving us anywhere towards any acceptable solution.

The two-state solution has been the internationally accepted solution to the problem. But there have been practical impediments such as increasing illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied territories of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. And the very question of contiguous territory for the Palestinians to establish an independent state of their own is not available in a practical sense, because under Israeli occupation, there has been change in the geography of the Palestinian territories over decades. So, practical problems regarding the two-state solution exist, particularly the status of Jerusalem and the future of Palesti-



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nian refugees outside the occupied territories and outside historical Palestine.

The whole idea of the Israeli Jewish people and the Palestinian people living together in a democratic state is still treated as a utopia. But what is important is to recognise that the events in the current phase of the conflict are leading to newer thinking and therefore, when one thinks about a solution, one has to take into account the new narratives that are emerging out of newer types of struggles.

The two dominant political factions of the Palestinian side have directly or indirectly accepted the idea of two states. In that context, and given the other challenges, is a one-state solution a utopia?

NT: It's correct that the main political parties among the Palestinians have supported a two-state solution – de facto in Hamas's case, but this is the consensus position among Palestinians. Now, it's important to note that the Palestinian support for a two-state solution does not derive from a vision of what would be most just or most desirable. At the start of the Zionist movement, at the end of the 19th century, the Jews in Palestine made up about 3% of the population in 1882 and Palestinians were the remaining 97%. Over time, we have seen the slow takeover of Palestine and the transformation of it into the land of Israel. Palestinians wouldn't come up with a solution that would give them a disconnected state without true sovereignty and a mere 22% of their homeland.

The two-state solution is based on Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in the 1967 War, but the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was founded before the 1967 War, the conflict factor was founded before the 1967 War, the project of

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NATHAN THRALL

Palestinian liberation and return of the refugees all precede the 1967 War. So, the roots of the Palestinian national movement are much deeper.

Now, it's clear that a two-state solution isn't happening. Even the two-state solution, the more realistic version of it, where the Palestinian state is demilitarised, where Palestinians have tunnels that they can use to go under sub-sovereign Israeli territory in order to reach Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, where most of the settlements [in the West Bank and East Jerusalem] will be annexed to Israel, where Gaza and the West Bank are disconnected from one another – even that proposal of the Geneva initiative, made during the Second Intifada, isn't happening. There's no two-state solution happening. Everyone recognises that this is the case.

It would take power that the Palestinians currently do not have in order to really bring about any solution. So, the situation we're looking at now is a continuation of what the human rights organisations have all deemed meets the definition of crime against humanity of apartheid. And really, any alternative to that is a utopia.

So, what does Israel want? Does it want to continue this system of occupation forever? How long will it be able to do it?

AKR: The Israeli government wants not only the status quo of its occupation and its colonial policies to continue, but also expand its control and annex more territories that

it occupies. What is preventing it from totally decimating Palestinian life and their resistance is the voices coming not only from the Palestinians within the occupied territories, but also the Palestinians from within the state of Israel; and from across the world. Therefore, the pressure that the Israeli population, both Jews and Arabs, can have on their government to change its policies; the popular pressure on the American government to change its continued strong support for the state of Israel; and international pressure [to restrain Israel] from doing what it is doing against the Palestinians all matter. There are questions on whether states in the international community are ready to accept this reality of day-to-day oppression of a set of people. But within Israel and within the U.S., pressure is much more significant.

Nathan, in your book you have written that Israel has made concessions in the past, but only when it was forced to do so, whether due to international pressure or violent Palestinian resistance. Now, you have a Democratic administration in Washington. Do you see any kind of meaningful pressure coming from the White House, or the liberal flank of the Democratic Party, on Israel, that would force Israel to make some concessions to the Palestinians?

NT: From the White House, I do not see any possibility of real pressure that would result in a true change to the status quo. From the liberal or progressive wing of the Democratic Party, I see a long-term possibility of change. If we're talking about the present Congress, look at the very simple Bill that doesn't change U.S. aid to Israel, but simply calls for the U.S. to examine its role in a policy like the detention of Palestinian children. Even something as simple as that, which still isn't touching aid, which is the really big thing for Democrats, is not realistic in the present Congress and probably not in the next one either. So, it's a very long road. But the trends in the U.S. do seem to suggest that that constituency is going to grow. And some of the people who are behind it are among the most popular politicians in America, like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. So, it is possible that we will reach a point in the distant future at

which the U.S. can put significant pressure on Israel in the way that it had before. It's also very important to remember the critical role of the Palestinians in bringing about the pressure – the pressure can't just come from growing sympathy for Palestinians in Congress or among progressives or internationally.

The Israeli narrative is that it is fighting terror. The Israelis, the Americans and the European Union have all designated Hamas as a terrorist organisation. So, is Hamas actually weakening the greater Palestinian movement or making it stronger?

AKR: If the Palestinian voices have to be heard, we have to recognise the diversity of voices amongst the Palestinians. In the initial days [of the Palestinian resistance], several Palestinian organisations, including Fatah and PFLP [Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine], took the armed struggle as their way of placing the Palestine issue before the international community and to resist Israeli occupation. But then under [PLO Chairman Yasser] Arafat's leadership, the PLO came to the negotiating table, took the diplomatic path. The First Intifada was more or less non-violent. It is in that context that Hamas emerged, in 1987. And Hamas became part of the armed resistance.

The whole point of talking about Hamas as something which is really distinct from other Palestinian entities would not be a good thing to do. Because there is already an attempt to separate the West Bank Palestinians and the Palestinians of the Gaza Strip. Some people even talked about three states. This time, the Palestinian identity is being asserted in a big manner. Therefore, I would view the kind of ideological division between Fatah and Hamas, between various Palestinian organisations, as something that comes up as part of what to do in a very dire condition of occupation. What kind of strategy they have to adopt, or what kind of ideology the Palestinians have to follow is up to them. But this whole narrative of seeing the Palestinians as being divided... they may have differences, but I think on the basic question of liberating Palestine, the question of an independent Palestinian state, the Palestinians are united, and that is the core of the Palestine question.



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