Palestine: History Runs Faster than Ideas

Sari Nusseibeh
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By Sari Nusseibeh

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The Oslo Accords have failed. The fragmentation of the West Bank and the absorption of East Jerusalem by Israel have rendered the classic two-state solution impossible. To get out of this rut, a new solution must be envisioned, one of confederal states and porous borders. Such a solution has no chance of achieving peace unless the strong party, Israel, accepts that if the status quo is maintained the Zionist project will come to nothing.

Almost half a century after the annexation of East Jerusalem by Israel and 20 years after the Oslo Accords, the European Union (EU) has started to realize that the absorption of this part of the occupied territory makes the classic two-state solution impossible to accomplish. Suddenly, Israel’s increasing encroachment on this part of the city, and on its Arab population, struck European officials as so important that urgent action was felt to be necessary. Consequently, East Jerusalem has started figuring both in official EU reports and in the EU map of financial support for the so-called process of Palestinian state-building. As a Palestinian Jerusalemite who for the past 20 years has hopelessly been trying to call the attention of the EU and other international emissaries to the deleterious effect of Israeli policies on a two-state solution, it was hard for me to know whether to feel relieved or angry. On the one hand, it was good to observe that the international community had finally come to see the light. On the other hand, it was frustrating to see that this happened only after the train had already left the station. Nothing anyone does now will turn back the clock: the ‘East Jerusalem’ conceived as a capital of a future Palestinian state no longer exists.

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The dynamic of settlement expansion

Does any other part of that once-sought-after hope exist any more? A land surveyor recently told me that Israeli appropriation of occupied Palestinian territory for various uses (major infrastructure, settlements, military use, etc.) had grown 120-fold since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. Israel simply encaged Palestinians into a fragmented territory, divided both geographically and politically, that represents less than 40% of the occupied zone from 1967, excluding East Jerusalem. After 1967, the city limits of Jerusalem were extended to cover an area of 70 sq km, at the expense of the neighboring West Bank territories. Palestinians, naively, have taken to declaring the ’67 lines as the basis for negotiations. Whatever transpires from such negotiations – if indeed they take off to begin with, and if, after they take off, they manage to produce some semblance of a two-state solution – would clearly not take shape the way the Palestinians (and the international community more widely) had in mind.

What is particularly striking about Israeli ingestion measures over the past 46 years is the underlying dynamic pattern, as distinct from the still picture one sees today. If it is with the still picture that peacemakers must start as they set about forming ideas, it is with the pattern they have to contend. The historically dynamic pattern is the real enemy. This is a universal law, for ideas are generally sought precisely in order to change such patterns. Ideas, being by definition new-born, require an extraordinary amount of energy to bring into motion, while patterns, already in motion, clearly have the upper hand. In this race, history runs faster than ideas.

Of course, entrenched patterns that are ostensibly irreversible can be changed; a history that seems to be running along an inevitable course could be made to alter direction. At one extreme, decisive wars have proved to be successful in making that happen. On the other hand, when ostensibly solid political structures suddenly collapse before our eyes (as in the former Soviet Union, or in Arab or other authoritarian regimes), the explanation normally is that we as observers have missed seeing signs of the subliminal patterns determining the direction of history. But, if we discount such possibilities, all that an American peace envoy such as US Secretary of State John Kerry can do at this point, in order to halt an unfolding historical process in Israel/Palestine, is to propose ideas that he hopes will bring that process to an end, thus allowing for the creation of a new process – toward the establishment of a state for the Palestinians in one shape or another. Needless to say, under the circumstances, that shape will be determined partly by his ideas, but mostly by the pre-existing pattern. The product will be a palliative, not a solution. It will be a cosmetic operation as far as the Palestinians are concerned, one that will in effect reflect a formalization of Israel’s overall control of the entire territory.
In simple terms, by the time an almost worldwide consensus came to be formed about the optimality of the idea of a two-state solution proposed just after 1967 by a few marginal individuals and groups, history had wiped the possibility of that idea off the map. What Kerry (or anyone else) has to contend with today is a totally different reality than that which prevailed even when the Oslo accords were signed. Discounting a definitive solution being achieved in one fell swoop, he will have to propose yet another set of transitional arrangements – extending for however long or short a period of time. These arrangements (halting settlement expansions, attracting substantial funding for paradigm-changing investments, etc.) would be conceived to halt or to slow the existing historical process, and to change radically the course of history by creating a different pattern. But such attempts to sow the seeds for a new pattern of political evolution would have to compete with the overwhelming odds of the already existing and directionally opposite pattern entrenched in the area. Twenty years of a failed Oslo experiment, and despite the spending of billions of dollars, have proven that no stage-by-stage process can counter or compete with the momentum of Israeli ingestion of the West Bank. The best outcome of this would not be the desired – though always recognized as fairly modest – two-state solution that Palestinians and the Arabs have declared their readiness to accept, but a very frail image of that.

Patterns are not only objective – as in the incremental growth in the number of settlements, highways, army outposts, infrastructures, etc. being built. They are also subjective – who the people are, and what they slowly become adapted to thinking or feeling, and how this is expressed in their behaviors. Look at the Palestinian demographic statistics: already about 70% of the population is under 45 years old and was not yet born when Israel’s occupation began. For them, life before the occupation does not exist. Nothing in their memories pulls them back to it. The past is not a political magnet. If their political eyes are fixed on anything, it is primarily a nebulous future in which they are free of rule by a bellicose and voracious enemy. Israel’s population, given natural growth as well as the large influx of post-Soviet immigration, is not so different. For them, pre-67 Israel is history. Another world. The world of today is that in which their self-identity is embodied in the larger space extending between the river and the sea. True, this space unfortunately contains large clusters of a foreign, unsavory and dangerous population that has to be kept under tight control. But such is their lot: they see themselves as a people persecuted by the entire world, and whose security can only be defended in a small plot on earth given to them by divine right. For them, the only
political future that makes sense is that in which their control over that space is made as tight as possible. The ‘liberals’ among them will wish to make that control as humane as possible: a ‘tolerant’ regime in which that foreign population can live their own lives within or behind visible or invisible walls, with as much demographic separation from them as possible. For Israelis, the past is a history that they are glad to get rid of.

It is not, therefore, only ideological sectors of the populations on this or that side of the national divide that may be set against a two-state solution on political grounds; it is the critical masses of those two populations that have slowly been shifting over the years, making that solution seem more like a dream or an idea of the past, rather than a realistic vision of a political future. That dream can no longer be relied upon to be a popular driving force energizing the masses towards a definitive solution. The historical pattern, also on the subjective side, is once again that of a tectonic shift away from the classical two-state solution. A frail image of that solution may still be entertained, but it would be an image shaped less by an emergent reality than by optimistic past hypotheses.

The illusion of the classic two-state solution

Even so, many will insist that the ‘two-state solution’ remains ‘the only game in town’. In view of what has been said, what can this mean? In practical terms, it can only mean that people have not yet managed to replace the first dream (and the diplomatic discourse associated with it) with another one as their means to imagine a vehicle that can transport them from a state of war toward a state of peace – from a life buttressed by belligerence to one embraced by serenity. But it is a faded dream. More and more, as time proceeds, even a dramatic event – such as that of the UN vote on a Palestinian state – is seen as belonging more to a virtual reality than to the real world, a world in which Palestinians explode in celebration after a singer from Gaza managed to win the title of ‘Arab Idol’ on a TV program recently, unconsciously making their celebration of the UN vote a year earlier a puny and pitiable effort in comparison!

But what about ‘Fayyadism’, some may retort? Hasn’t the World Bank been issuing reports about the impressive bottom-up state-building efforts in Palestine led by former prime minister Fayyad, underpinned by an influx of foreign donations and investments in mega-structures such as the new town of Rawabi? Haven’t Palestinians over the past twenty years been engaged, more or less successfully, in building up their state structures, including security? Does this count for nothing?

A sensible observer should be wary here about the language that politicians, commentators and journalists use. Whether the image is that of building from the top down or from the bottom up, the reality is that the
solid foundations for a real state – the components making up sovereignty – are lacking. To use another image that may point up the contrast, the reality is that the Palestinian Authority (PA) is a floating island and the undercurrent determining its flow is Israel’s rule. The PA’s legislative and executive representatives may be democratically elected, but they are neither free to legislate nor administer the space allocated to them. Banks may indicate a steep rise in disposable incomes, but these figures are not rooted in the country’s production; they are derived from foreign loans and donations. When Fayyad was finally replaced as prime minister, the PA’s debt was one full third of its entire GNP – reportedly more than $1.3 billion. To guarantee the salaries of its employees, the PA has to rely on the good will of its donors, as well as on Israeli acquiescence to transfer VAT cuts onto goods and services originating in, or coming through, Israel to the PA – constituting more than 70% of the entire package of goods and services consumed by Palestinians. This is all, of course, quite apart from further restrictions placed by Israel on the free movement of goods and personnel between the various parts of the PA archipelago. In fact, both the PA as a structure as well as the Palestinians as individuals now depend on an extended credit line from donors and banks, for which there is no solid economic foundation. But what about those major financial operations, someone might ask, such as Rawabi, again, but also telecom and others? The answer is that yes, there exist now in Palestine (which was not previously the case) a number of world-ranking wealthy wild-cats, but their wealth, contrasted with that of the rest of the population, begins to look more and more like that of that sector in Egypt before the recent revolution that brought the entire system down because of the widening gap between the rich and the poor.

Of course, the overall economic picture need not look so grim. Whether through lifting Israeli restrictions on movement and trade, adjusting financial mechanisms that eliminate corruption by top-ranking politicians and officials, or by proper use of theoretically available, though admittedly limited, resources – such as water, offshore gas in Gaza, oil or even shale rock in the West Bank – as well as through major development projects along the Jordan Valley and elsewhere, a relatively viable economy sustaining expenditure can still be established. But for all that to happen, sovereignty is required. Short of that, an economic initiative will lessen but not eradicate the PA’s economic dependence on the outside world. As for the self-governing and civil-society structures that are sometimes pointed out as markers of the new state-building phase, these have been a constant and naturally evolving feature of Palestinian society, with far-reaching historical roots. Such structures can exist and function with or without a fully grown ‘Palestinian state’.

Where is history leading us?
If history seems to be driving its own course, then where is it leading us? In the short term – with active international intervention – perhaps it is leading us toward the establishment of a frail image of the classic two-state solution. But, in many ways, such a ‘solution’ would have to be ‘imposed’ on the Palestinians. Not only would it provoke strong objections from the Palestinian world at large, and not be embraced by Fatah; it would also, more importantly, provoke strong opposition even from within the ranks of Fatah – the mainstream party identified with the peace process. It is not even clear whether it would find support from the existing Fatah leadership itself, from members of the Central Committee or Revolutionary Council. The members of these two bodies were elected by the larger body of the Fatah Congress when this convened in Bethlehem three years ago. As is well known, a major schism within the Central Committee was created recently as a result of the confrontation between Abu Mazen and Mohammed Dahlan, ostensibly to do with mutual accusations of corruption. As a result, Dahlan was made an outcast. But as his popularity among the Fatah grassroots in Gaza demonstrates, he remains a major political player, and this particular schism within the Fatah ranks remains therefore a major element of weakness in the movement, undermining its leadership especially when making unpopular political decisions. But this is not where it all ends: among the other members of the Central Committee there are clearly major ideological differences having to do with potential prospective solutions, as evidenced by the public statements some of them make. Going down the hierarchy, such ideological differences can be found all the way to the bottom. Therefore, Fatah’s internal problems, coupled with the opposition of the rank and file of the Islamic movement, will ensure that the frail solution, if and when it is arrived at, has a frail existence. Its longevity will be in question, and pundits will once again be found scratching their heads for another scenario to accommodate the unyielding historical process, and the ever-pressing challenges of political imbalance.

Yet another handicap that Palestinians suffer is the absence of vision and leadership. The absence of vision can be excused because skillful navigation of possible futures with the aim of determining the best realizable outcome is not at all a manageable task in the current conditions. But the absence of leadership means an inability to rally critical mass support for an unpopular solution. And following the departure of Abu Mazen from the scene – whether by choice, ill-health or simply due to old age – any candidate chosen by whatever means to fit that unpopular solution would surely be seen as a traitor for accepting it. Again, this is not a prescription for stability or longevity.

Therefore, assuming that, instead of continuing political stalemate, such a solution is indeed made to come about, the next development would be the formalization of a pariah state, existing in a condition of apartheid in
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all but name. Coupled with the growing sentiment in Israel about making the country as Jewish as possible, the natural development to expect would be the formalization of apartheid in the entire region under Israel’s rule. Of course, some would claim that this state of apartheid already exists, whether within pre-’67 Israel or as extended to the West Bank and Gaza. But, moving beyond what might simply seem today like pugnacious name-calling, anyone can see that this is the precise condition history is moving Israel toward, sooner or later, whether willingly and consciously or otherwise. And apartheid will have no place in the 21st century. Israel will simply collapse from within. So, whether we end up with the diminutive pariah state that Israel may now be willing to create, or the policy of containment that Israel is now pursuing continues, the net outcome is bound to be political convulsions and deterioration, leading to ground zero.

What is to be done?

This brings us to the question whether such conflicting outcomes could be minimized, avoided or pre-empted. Given what has been said so far, entirely new frameworks to approach the conflict would be required. I shall address two methods, one based on mutual agreement, and the other on unilateralism. For the first, what we would be looking for is a solution that could be sufficiently embraced by the two sides – somewhat in the manner that the classical two-state solution was (and probably in theory still is) embraced. That solution (now foregone) was palpably favorable to the Israeli side, but it was also minimally acceptable to the Palestinian side. Could a new shape for a two-state solution be designed that would account for the needs and concerns of the two sides in such a way as to make that design also palpably favorable to Israel but more acceptable to the Palestinians, and therefore one that could rally sufficient mass support? We are talking here about a new dream, an end-game that might perhaps constitute a new rallying point for the two sides. Perhaps such a design could be a form of confederacy between two states (or political organisms), one being primarily Jewish, and the other primarily Arab, with its totally porous borders essentially being delineated along demographic lines. This would mean that populations would not be removed from where they happen to be, but only borders. But it would also have to mean that borders would not constitute restrictions on the positive aspects of the present-day ways of life. In particular with respect to Israeli Palestinians, the creation of such borders should not detract from anything they possess or have access to today, and should only signify a transformation in their political affiliation, should they choose to become citizens of the new Palestinian state. Mixed cities, such as Jerusalem, would have a shared governance structure.
Planners could of course be imaginative in the design. On the Israeli side, two imperatives (among others) would presumably have to be considered: Jewishness and (external) security. The suggested confederacy would definitely satisfy the first concern; the second would probably be accommodated in the context of the agreement. On the Palestinian side, two imperatives would also presumably need to be satisfied: independence and ‘return’. The design would satisfy the first concern, and would go much further in satisfying the second than the classical two-state solution: refugees from present-day Israel would be enabled to return to their hometowns in what would become parts of the future Palestinian state. Moreover, Jerusalem being a shared capital should accommodate the desires of the two sides.

A confederacy also implies a more equitable share of resources (natural or otherwise), and should provide a larger and potentially richer economic space for investment and development than that provided for in an economic program for the PA. In other words, the overall economic returns on this proposed design would exceed those conceived for an enfeebled and frail Palestinian state in a much smaller area. A typical example of the difference may be seen in the kind of regional development conference now being prepared by Tony Blair for next October, where major world investors will be concentrating on opportunities in Israel, as a world leader in business, with only a secondary part being devoted to the PA and Jordan as a side-show. In a confederacy, the Palestinian state would have a far better share of attention, if only as the complementary component of a partnership.

Such a radically new design would take into account the overall cumulative changes (both subjective and objective) that have been taking place in the area over the past 46 years, but in such a way as to reorient possible outcomes in a manner that replaces worst by best scenarios for all concerned. A visible handicap in this hypothesis, however, is the difficulty in rallying support for a new vision of peace on both sides. This is not an altogether impossible task should there be leadership on the two sides who (a) come to see the optimality of such a new vision, and (b) have sufficient charismatic and other qualities to enable them to propagate the new dream. But, assuming that such a new vision comes to be adopted by such leaderships, the next step would be to devise an implementation program or a ‘roadmap’ that would lead to the fulfillment of that dream. A roadmap annexed to the vision might increase its number of supporters on both sides. As it happens, the various steps in such a roadmap could be implemented unilaterally, by the Israeli side. Let us therefore now consider this method of approaching the subject.
In case a formal agreement between the two sides is thought to be difficult or impossible – whether due to lack of sufficient general support on the Palestinian side or lack of conviction on the part of their leadership – but assuming that the Israeli leadership can see the mutual benefits accruing from pursuing such a course (to pre-empt inevitable breakdowns), then, given the full control Israel exercises over the life of Palestinians, it would make eminent sense for the Israeli government to take unilateral steps that would bring the new dream closer. Such steps could proceed on two fronts: (a) devolution of authority to the PA, coupled with a major economic growth program to bring the standard of living of Palestinians in the PA up to a par with that of Palestinian Israelis, and (b) a widening of the space of basic freedoms (human and civil rights) available to Palestinians in the PA areas.

On the first front, Israel could begin to devolve authority to the PA in a series of steps planned to be causally connected one to the other, in accordance with a timetable of its own design. Such devolution of authority would be both horizontal and vertical, increasing the geographic zones allocated to the PA as well as increasing the degrees of executive power in those areas. For example, more B areas could be turned into A areas, and more of C into B, and then into A. Coupled with this, the international community and the government of Israel could also give the PA assistance in engaging in major investments in those areas. This would require widening the space of economic authority available to the PA, including on matters such as trade and export, as well as widening the space available for fuller use of natural resources (energy and water). This part of the initiative would simply be a ‘sovereignty’ empowerment project, taking into account as one major objective the leveling of the socio-economic conditions of Palestinians who are Israeli citizens and who are Palestinian citizens.

On the second front, Israel could take unilateral and calculated steps toward widening the ‘human rights’ space in which Palestinians live. Each step that would be taken (as on the devolution front) would be evaluated so as to give sufficient reason for implementing the step that would follow. Such steps could start, for example, by replacing Israeli checkpoints with Palestinian personnel. A large number of these checkpoints have been removed over the past few years; this process could be continued until only Palestinian checkpoints are in place (and eventually done away with altogether). It is assumed, of course, in this as in other areas, that security cooperation between the two sides (which seems in any case to be independent of political relations between them) is not only maintained but also strengthened. A second step could be to begin allowing one age group after the other to reach the Aqsa Mosque (say on Fridays, to begin with).
A third step might be to begin allowing workers from Gaza to work in the Israeli labor market (again, this could be done one age group after the other – the older first). All these steps could be rescinded with the press of a button, should the implementation of any one of them seem to have caused a security breach. Such steps could be further augmented until Palestinians from the PA area can begin to exercise full human and civil rights throughout Palestine/Israel, while maintaining political attachments to a continuingly enabled PA.

The convergence of negotiated and unilateral approaches

The end-game of this process of cumulative change would be a structure of confederacy, where two states – delineated primarily by demographic populations and having porous borders – would guarantee the minimal basic needs and rights of the two sides. Throughout the process of change, the area’s security regime would obviously be in the hands of the party in control, i.e. Israel. Once the full-blown political structure was ready to be put in place, the two sides could agree on the nature of the overall security regime required.

The question may be raised here whether Palestinians would go along with an Israeli unilateralist approach of the form described, given especially an initial failure to agree, or the lack of any formal support (from governments or parties and factions). We would here of course be broaching a hypothetical situation, for which no guaranteed answers exist. But it stands to reason that neither the PA as a formal structure, nor Palestinians as individuals, would turn down the opportunities being offered them. After all, parts of or all the new space on offer is a space that Palestinians have in fact been yearning for and struggling to attain. A worker from Gaza suddenly being offered the opportunity to start working again in Israel, or a Palestinian from Qalqilya suddenly being given the chance to pray at al-Aqsa, would in all likelihood not turn down such an offer. Likewise, an area (say Abu Dis in the environs of Jerusalem) being turned into an A area for the PA is neither likely to be objected to by the PA, nor by the inhabitants themselves of this town. In fact, this would all be much more likely if it was done unilaterally, with no formal agreement penned by the two sides, the only (implicit or explicit) condition understood by all being the need for an absolute ban on any form of violence.

Indeed, the cumulative benefits accruing both to Palestinian individuals as well as to the PA would be such that it is not inconceivable the PA would at some point in the process seek to become party to what was happening, and eager to begin negotiating an acceptable deal as an end-game. In this case, one can conceive the two approaches (negotiated and unilateral) as merging with one another at some point. From Israel’s point of view,
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it might be deemed best if such a point were reached later rather than at the initial stage – and better, therefore, if it first adopted the unilateral approach. There would be a number of advantages to this. First, being in total control would be better than being subject to an agreement on mutually verifiable steps – an experiment that has proved its failure since Oslo. Israel could cease implementation unilaterally without being accused of having reneged on any agreement. Second, through such positive steps, Israel would radically transform its image – both among Palestinians and in the world at large. Rather than be taken for the territorially voracious and morally indifferent colonialist power it is beginning to be viewed as, it would come to be seen as a country genuinely prepared to reach peace with its native inhabitants. Third, it would not be made to feel it was giving up on any of its major security pillars: it would remain the sole party in the driving-seat.

To conclude: both the still picture one sees today, and the underlying dynamic driving the course of history so far, make an agreement on a classical-type two-state solution today impossible to reach. Something less than such a solution may be reached through heightened international involvement, but it is unlikely that this would be more than a temporary containment measure. Interim steps toward bringing about such a solution would also in all probability not withstand the force of the underlying dynamic of the past half a century that has resulted in the current situation. Natural projection into the future of such a situation foretells deterioration, and, quite likely, the collapse of the Zionist project. This may seem like something for Palestinians to look forward to, but both the ruinous path downhill as well as the political distortions afterward would not bode well for anyone who would be living in the region at the time. The situation can yet be saved. But for this to happen, what is needed above all is that Israel’s leadership be fully convinced that the alternative would be destructive for Israel.
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