__Realistic Approaches to Conflict Management: The Centrality of Disengagement__

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From 1993 through the end of 2000, Israelis and Palestinians struggled with the Oslo process, with intense negotiations on interim agreements, punctured by violence, and finally, a catastrophic ending. The "permanent status" agreement mandated by the Declaration of Principles could not be obtained – indeed, as Dennis Ross shows in his very detailed analysis – throughout this period, there was very little movement towards common ground on the core "identity" issues of refugee claims and Jerusalem. In these dimensions, the negotiations ended with the Israelis and Palestinians further apart than when they began, as reflected by the expressions of hostility and rejectionism dominant in the Palestinians schools and media. And the collapse of these efforts was followed by four years of terror and unimaginable brutality, leaving the two societies deeply scarred.

In attempting to move beyond this situation and looking towards the future, the lessons must be learned, including the fact that "faith based initiatives", built primarily on deep desires for peace, are insufficient. Much of the Israeli literature on these negotiations, particularly the books published by central participants, such as Uri Savir and Yosi Beilin, reflects the deep personal commitment and hopes for a basic transition in relationship with the Palestinians. But wishful thinking, the development of close personal bonds between negotiators, exchanges of family pictures, and enthusiastic participation in peace rallies are insufficient to sustain a major political transition. Furthermore, the core belief of the Israeli peace movement and European conventional wisdom, which envisions the "end to occupation" and a return to the 1949 Armistice lines (often erroneously

referred to as "pre-1967 borders") as the basis for ending the conflict, is also not supported by the evidence, and ignores the depth of Arab and Moslem ideological rejection of the concept of Jewish sovereign equality. (Indeed, according to this simplistic formula, the 1967 War, which led to the occupation, should not have occurred.) Instead, the strategy of peace, like warfare, must be based on rational analysis and realistic assessment of options, scenarios and potential outcomes.

The myths of Herzl's and Ben Gurion's successful pursuits "impossible dreams" ("im tirtzu, ayn zeh agadah") notwithstanding, a close reading of history shows that the founders of modern political Zionism were essentially rational decision makers who identified achievable objectives, understand the obstacles, chose the best option, and moved towards implementation. That generation recognized that in an age of nation states, Jewish survival as a people and a culture required sovereignty. The Zionist founders were inspired and inspirational leaders, but at critical moments, they chose policies within the bounds of realism and national interest, as seen in Ben Gurion's decision on Partition, as well as Menachem Begin's policies in negotiating a peace treaty with Egypt.

In contrast, the displacement of pragmatism and rational cost-benefit analysis with messianism has often ended in failure. This is the case of the Oslo peace process, in which enthusiasm and hope obscured the evidence of Arafat's corrupt leadership and the continued support for terrorism. On the other end of the political spectrum, the settlement movement founded in the aftermath of the 1967 War was and continues to be messianic. The belief that a dominant Jewish presence would be tolerated by a large, rapidly growing and hostile Palestinian population was never tenable.

Indeed, in searching for realistic approaches in the context of intense ethno-national conflicts, in general, and our situation, in particular, we must recognize that in most cases, conflict management is the most pragmatic option. After decades of hatred and rejectionism, we need to understand that there are no quick solutions. As President Clinton learned following eight years of unprecedented political and economic investment, no outside party, including the US government, with all of its influence, can force Palestinians and the wider Arab-Islamic world to accept Israeli legitimacy, and the recent Geneva negotiations are simply a reworking of the Oslo hopes. Similarly, America cannot

force the Israeli public to accept unacceptable risks or terms, despite European mythology to the contrary.

The terms that claim to provide the basis for a "two state solution", including boundaries, the status of Jerusalem, and Palestinian refugee claims, may or may not be acceptable from an Israeli perspective, but these details are not primary factors. Rather, years of experience demonstrate that given the current realities on the ground, the chances that such an "end of conflict" agreement could be implemented are very small. Any such process will take many years, beginning with building mutual confidence and persuading Palestinian and Arab societies that a Jewish state is both legitimate and cannot be destroyed.

In the face of these realities, including the unacceptability of the political status quo, **unilateral disengagement** provides a pragmatic response to the complex reality left by the violent failure of the Oslo process. The need for such an alternative approach was widely recognized by Israelis in the course of the past four years – this is a "bottom up" initiative, which was later adopted by Prime Minister Sharon, as he recognized the inherent logic of disengagement in the context of Israeli national interests.

For this Israeli perspective, the situation created by the 1967 War and the "occupation" was no longer tenable. Neither the framework based on "land for peace", as outlined in the Israeli cabinet decisions and United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, nor the "greater Israel" approaches proved realistic. Instead, the ongoing conflict and the absence of boundaries allowed easy access for Palestinian terrorists to attack Israeli cities and roads, with over 1000 deaths and many more injuries in the period of post-Oslo terror campaign. While effective security measures, including preventive targeted killings, reduced the threat, Israelis recognized the centrality of physical separation, and enthusiastically embraced the concept of a barrier that would divide the two populations. Such a barrier around the Gaza Strip has been very effective, and as construction of a similar structure proceeded in the center of country, reducing terror attacks significantly, support for unilateral disengagement grew. Efforts to negotiate a "two-state solution" had failed due to the Palestinian rejectionism, but this goal could be approximated through unilateral disengagement. Gradually, Ariel Sharon absorbed the strategic logic and recognized the growing domestic

political pressures. Despite his central role in building settlements, he became a leading advocate of disengagement, beginning with the removal of all Israeli civilians and military bases from Gaza.

Sharon and other members of the government also understand that the separation framework provides the best (or least damaging) approach to deflecting the diplomatic pressures and demographic threats that face Israel. For decades, the UN, the US and Europe have been producing a wide range of political initiatives, increasingly pressing Israel for concessions in the hope of a quick end to the conflict. The failed Oslo process, as well as the Mitchell commission report, and the Roadmap provide recent examples, and failure to present an Israeli initiative would inevitably result in renewed pressures. Thus, the Israeli disengagement plan provides an alternative to an externally imposed comprehensive peace plan, and the catastrophic violence that would likely result.

Similarly, separation is a means of addressing the demographic threat – the post-Oslo Palestinian strategy to allow the growing Arab population in an undivided political entity extending from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River to overwhelm the Jewish population. This strategy (the single-state solution) is another version of the continuing Palestinian effort to reverse the 1947 UN Partition plan and the creation of the State of Israel. It has been presented by the PLO's Negotiation Support Unit (inexplicably still funded by a number European governments, including the UK and Sweden, long after negotiations ended), and is consistent with the policies pursued by Arafat and other Palestinian leaders. Through a de facto division of the territory into areas of Jewish and Arab domination, this strategy can be blocked at an early stage.

Beyond these core political objectives, unilateral separation or disengagement also has the potential benefit of reducing the level of daily friction. In the case of Cyprus, for example, the massive barrier separating the Greek and Turkish populations that was constructed following the 1974 war had such an effect, including ending terror attacks and responses. A generation has grown up on both sides without the intense hatred resulting from direct and hostile contact, and now, as the barrier has been opened to allow resumed traffic between the two populations, this has been free of violence and with little rancor. In this case,

Frost's ironic admonition about the impact of fences was wrong – good fences did produce good, or at least better neighbors.

Of course, no solution is perfect, and the concerns presented by critics of unilateral separation cannot be dismissed without serious attention. Israel's withdrawal from Southern Lebanon in May 2000 was seen by Hizbollah as a major victory, and a demonstration that the strategy of terror was successful. This example is understood to have contributed to Arafat's strategy of violence and his decision to stonewall at the Camp David negotiations that took place two months later. In the case of Gaza, beyond the claims of victory, Israeli unilateral withdrawal could lead to escalation of missile attacks extending to Ashkelon and beyond.

Furthermore, a unilateral disengagement in Gaza and Northern Samaria will not guarantee quiet on the diplomatic front. Although the US government has accepted the Sharon government's links between this withdrawal and acceptance of the principle that an eventual agreement on borders will recognize changes in the 1949 armistice lines, the other members of the Quarter are under no such obligation. They can be expected to continue to press for a full territorial withdrawal, or at least for offsetting transfer of land to a future Palestinian state.

But the greatest challenge to unilateral disengagement will result from the internal Israeli conflict that will result from its implementation. A significant and very dynamic sector of Israeli society remains committed to settlement activities, and clings to the messianism that drives this movement. The 1982 withdrawal from the settlements in Sinai (under the terms of the peace treaty) led to major civil disturbance, and violent confrontations between of the IDF and the residents. In 1995, internal conflict and mass demonstrations in favor and against the Oslo process ended with the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin – a catastrophic precedent whose repetition is unthinkable. Since plans for unilateral disengagement and settlement removal were announced in late 2003, the level of protests has grown. Similarly, efforts to remove small illegal outposts in Judea and Samaria have also resulted in violent scuffles and injuries.

Nevertheless, rational and cautious conflict management based on unilateral separation remains the least bad option, even after Arafat's death. The obstacles and dangers discussed above can be mitigated, while a return to the

Oslo framework and "permanent status negotiations" is unlikely to succeed, and will probably lead to another and even more deadly campaign of terrorism. Even under the most optimistic scenarios, including a stable and united Palestinian leadership able to prevent terror attacks, Arafat's shadow will block efforts to change strongly held Palestinian beliefs related to refugee claims, Jerusalem, and the legitimacy of Jewish sovereignty. While the disengagement process in Gaza and northern Samaria (near Jenin and Shechem/Nablus) might now be coordinated with a post-Arafat government, separation remains the most realistic and rational approach.