

Gaza War: Peace Needs Imagination

“... a review of actual cases shows a whole category of wars in which the very idea of defeating the enemy [military] is unreal.”

“[i]nability to carry on the struggle can, in practice, be replaced by two other grounds for making peace: the first is the improbability of victory; the second is its unacceptable cost.”

Clausewitz

Introduction

The latest iteration of violence in the Middle East was marked by the Hamas attack on Israel on 07 Oct and the war that Israel has waged on the Gaza Strip ever since. There now seems to be no solution to peace other than the two-state solution. An Israeli state and a Palestinian state existing side by side in peace can no longer be treated as a dangerous illusion. The reason for this thought is due to the fact that there are, after all, only a few possible alternatives to the two-state solution: Palestinian self-rule in both the Gaza Strip and West Bank, and an eventual political solution that would result in the establishment of a Palestinian state.

The Two Extreme Positions

The two-state solution lies between the two extreme viewpoints. There is Hamas's solution, which is the destruction of Israel. There is the Israeli ultra-right's solution, which is the Israeli annexation of Gaza and the West Bank and the dismantling of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Unfortunately, both sides have not considered each other as having a right to establish a nation, so conflicts and war have continued.

Israel's opposition to a non-Hamas Palestinian Authority governing Gaza and its declared international opposition to the reoccupation of Gaza by Israel have also prevented any solution.

Stepping away from the extremes is the Conflict Management' approach pursued for the last decade or so by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, which aimed to maintain the status quo indefinitely, but the world is witness to just how that has worked out.

There is also the idea of a binational state, ending Israel's status as a Jewish state. Bi-nationalism in this context expresses the idea that the land should be transformed into a secular state, a constitutional-liberal state, with Arabs and Jews co-existing in a secular democratic system. Its famous maxim is 'One Land for Two Peoples', and its most famous proponent was the Palestinian American writer Edward Said. This is distinguished from the two-state solution, according to which two states, one Israeli and the other Palestinian, coexist next to each other. [\[1\]](#) But can these alternatives resolve the conflict without causing even greater calamities?

Two-State Solution

US President Joe Biden and his top national security officials have repeatedly and publicly reaffirmed their belief that it represents the only way to create lasting peace among the Israelis, the Palestinians, and the Arab countries of the Middle East. [\[2\]](#) The call for a return to the two-

state paradigm has been echoed by leaders across the Arab world, countries of the European Union, Australia, Canada, and even Washington's main rival, China.

India's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Ruchira Kamboj, articulated India's position in Mar by stating, "Only a two-state solution, achieved through direct and meaningful negotiations between both sides on final status issues, will deliver an enduring peace. India is committed to supporting a two-state solution where the Palestinian people are able to live freely in an independent country within secure borders, with due regard to the security needs of Israel."[\[3\]](#)

The two-state solution dates back to 1937, when a British Commission suggested a partition of the British mandate territory, then known as Palestine, into two states. Ten years later, the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 181, which proposed two states for two peoples: one Arab and one Jewish. Although the resolution's recommended territorial partition, it left neither side satisfied, the Jews accepted it, but the Palestinians, encouraged by their Arab state sponsors, rejected it. The ensuing war led to the founding of the state of Israel; millions of Palestinians, meanwhile, became refugees, and their national aspirations languished.[\[4\]](#)

But a lack of leadership, trust, and interest on both sides and the repeated failure to change those realities have made it impossible to conceive of a credible pathway to a two-state solution. After the 07 Oct 2024, incident, it has become even more difficult. The Israelis and the Palestinians are angrier and seem less likely than ever to achieve the mutual trust that a two-state solution would require.

The current ruling coalition in Israel remains opposed to any such solution. Politics in Israel has also shifted gradually to the right, with a perception that sections of Palestinians are not reconciled to the existence of Israel and have opposed compromises in the past.

Notwithstanding these issues, if the conflict is to be resolved peacefully, the two-state solution is the only idea left standing for want of a better alternative.

The Oslo Process

The idea of a Palestinian state lay mostly dormant for decades as Israel and its Arab neighbours became preoccupied with their own conflict, one result of which was the Israeli occupation and settlement of Gaza and the West Bank after the 1967 Six-Day War, which placed millions of Palestinians under direct Israeli control but without the rights accorded to Israeli citizens. [\[5\]](#)

Eventually, however, terrorist attacks launched by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and an uprising of the Palestinian people against Israeli occupation in the 1980s forced Israel to come to terms with the fact that the situation had become untenable. [\[6\]](#)

In 1993, Israel and the PLO signed the American-brokered Oslo Accords, recognizing each other and laying the groundwork for a phased, incremental process intended to eventually lead to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. The two-state solution's moment appeared to have arrived.[\[7\]](#)

There was apparently a detailed outline of what the two-state solution would look like: a Palestinian state in 97 per cent of the West Bank and all of Gaza, with mutually agreed swaps of territory that would compensate the Palestinian state for the three per cent of West Bank land that Israel would annex, which at that time contained some 80 per cent of all the Jewish settlers on Palestinian lands.[\[8\]](#)

The Palestinians would have their capital in East Jerusalem, where predominantly Arab suburbs would come under Palestinian sovereignty and predominantly Jewish suburbs under Israeli sovereignty. The two countries would share control of Jerusalem's so-called Holy Basin, the site of the most important shrines of the three Abrahamic faiths. [9]

But a final agreement on those terms never materialized. In the end, the edifice of peace that so many had laboured hard to construct was consumed by violence as the Palestinians launched another, more intense uprising and the Israelis expanded their occupation of the West Bank. The ensuing conflict lasted for five years, claiming thousands of lives on both sides and destroying all hopes for reconciliation.

Prime Minister Netanyahu, who had dominated his country's politics for the preceding fifteen years, had persuaded the Israelis that they had no Palestinian partner for peace and therefore did not need to address the challenge of what to do with the three million Palestinians in the West Bank and the two million in Gaza whom they effectively controlled. He sought instead to "manage" the conflict by kneecapping the PA and taking steps to make it easier for Hamas, which shared his aversion to the two-state solution, to consolidate its rule in Gaza. At the same time, he gave free rein to the settler movement in the West Bank to make it impossible for a contiguous part of a Palestinian state to ever emerge there.

The Palestinians also lost faith in the two-state solution. Some turned back to armed struggle, while others began to gravitate towards the idea of a binational state in which Palestinians would enjoy equal rights with Jews. Hamas's version of a 'One-state Solution', which would do away with Israel altogether, also gained greater traction in the West Bank, where the popularity of Hamas began to eclipse the leadership of Mahmoud Abbas, the President of the PA. [10]

Abandoning the Cause

The Arab states had decided to all but abandon the Palestinian cause. They had come to see Israel as a natural ally in countering the Iranian-led 'Axis of Resistance' that had taken root across the Arab world. This new strategic calculation found expression in the Abraham Accords, negotiated by the Trump administration, in which Bahrain, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates each fully normalised relations with Israel without insisting on the establishment of a Palestinian state.[11]

There were also talks regarding the normalisation of ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia, the custodian of Islam's holiest sites. Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States were also on the brink of a regional realignment.

The war has changed everything. The assault on Gaza has immense humanitarian implications. On the West Bank, anger over the war is compounded by the systematic violence of Israeli settlers who have assaulted Palestinians and driven some from their homes. Few Palestinians believe that the Israelis will allow them to build a viable state free of military occupation.

Conclusion

After decades of US-led diplomacy failed to achieve the desired outcome, it seemed to many analysts that the dream had died. But today, a two- or three-state solution with Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank is a reality that seems to be the only way forward.

To quote Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, "If you are angry over what we are doing to face the Palestinian uprising, it is not that we do not understand. We understand their dreams very

well, but unfortunately, here we have a conflict between two dreams... We agree with the Palestinians having a dream, but they should understand that it is impossible.”^[12]

The atrocities committed by Hamas on 07 Oct now being replaced by the destruction and deaths caused by Israel. There is thus a stronger need for a credible process that can eventually lead to an agreement. Both sides need to understand each other’s dreams.

Continued fighting cannot bring Israelis and Palestinians closer to long-term peace. There needs to be a concept of victory beyond military accomplishments. War must be a means to achieve a better reality. Though there are seemingly unresolvable complexities, a solution cannot remain ‘unresolved forever, for which attitudes need to change.

Wars often don’t end until both sides are convinced that they are better off coexisting with their adversaries than confronting them. The fact is, no one can predict how far the two sides are from that point that can lead to a solution that has eluded them for decades.

Endnotes

[1] Yi LI (2011) Edward Said’s Thoughts and Palestinian Nationalism, *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*,

[2] Indyk, Martin. “The Strange Resurrection of the Two-State Solution: How an Unimaginable War Could Bring About the Only Imaginable Peace.” *Foreign Affairs*, April 9, 2024. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/palestine-strange-resurrection-two-state-solution-indyk>.

[3] “Welcome Any Country Interested in Using Its Voice to Deter ...?: US.” *The Times of India*, April 18, 2024. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/us-welcomes-countries-to-deter-russian-offensive-and-help-in-gaza-conflict/articleshow/109415108.cms>.

[4] “General Assembly - Question of Palestine.” *Question of Palestine*, April 30, 2024. <https://www.un.org/unispal/data-collection/general-assembly/#:~:text=The Question of Palestine and the General Assembly&text=The question of Palestine was,under a special international regime>.

[5] “History of the Question of Palestine - Question of Palestine.” *Question of Palestine*, April 29, 2024. <https://www.un.org/unispal/history/>.

[6] Robinson, Kali. “What Is Hamas?” *Council on Foreign Relations*, April 19, 2024. <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-hamas>.

[7] Indyk, Martin. “The Strange Resurrection of the Two-State Solution: How an Unimaginable War Could Bring About the Only Imaginable Peace.” *Foreign Affairs*, April 9, 2024. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/palestine-strange-resurrection-two-state-solution-indyk>.

[8] Ibid

[9] THE STATUS OF JERUSALEM, Prepared for, and under the guidance of, the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People UNITED NATIONS New York, 1997 <https://www.un.org/unispal/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/The-Status-of-Jerusalem-English-199708.pdf>

[10] Indyk, Martin. “The Strange Resurrection of the Two-State Solution: How an Unimaginable War Could Bring About the Only Imaginable Peace.” Foreign Affairs, April 9, 2024. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/palestine-strange-resurrection-two-state-solution-indyk>.

[11] The Abraham Accords: Israel–Gulf Arab Normalisation. (2020). Strategic Comments

[12] Haider, Ejaz. “Why War In Palestine Will Continue.” The Dawn, April 21, 2024. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1828763>.

Major General Jagatbir Singh, VSM (Retd) is a Distinguished Fellow at the USI of India. Commissioned in 1981 into the 18 Cavalry, he has held various important command and Staff appointments including command of an Armoured Division.

Article uploaded on 07-05-2024

Disclaimer: The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the organisation that he belongs to or of the USI of India.