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"Between River and Sea: Separate Arab, Jewish States?"

By Kenneth W. Stein

If you believe that Palestinian Arabs and Israelis should exercise self-determination in separate states, then the issue of resolving or managing their conflict is simply how to divide the land area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

An axiom in Arab-Israeli negotiations is that yesterday's rejected idea is tomorrow's accepted plan. Since the 1930s, the notion of establishing two states has been on the negotiating table, but not fully accepted by all sides simultaneously. Not until very recently have Israelis, Palestinians, leading Arab governments and the United States articulated and supported the same idea unequivocally, in public, and at the same time.

In the past 80 years, embedded in all British, U.N. and U.S. efforts to resolve the conflict, dividing the land was suggested. The British and the United Nations suggested partition into Arab and Jewish states in 1937 and 1947, but the Arab world rejected the notion both times. Israeli withdrawal from some of the territories was suggested by the United Nations from the late 1960s onward, but Israelis and Arabs could not agree on what withdrawal meant and if that ended in a final peace. In the 1990s, Palestinians and Israelis agreed on separation and disengagement from each other's lives, but some Arab states remained unprepared to recognize Israel. Not until November 2001 did a U.S. president publicly support the establishment of a Palestinian state and his secretary of state define with some geographic specificity what those states should look like.

Last month, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah agreed on essentially this same formula. Sharon told an Israeli newspaper that "there will be a Palestinian state," and that he will "make painful compromises" for that to happen. In order to offer greater security to Israelis, Sharon further suggested the establishment of "buffer zones" between the two neighboring populations. Abdullah told a New York Times correspondent that if there was "full [Israeli] withdrawal from all the occupied territories, in accord with U.N. resolutions, including in Jerusalem, [then there would be]...full normalization of relations."

Historically, at best, Israeli and Arab leaders have not trusted each other. These feelings are likely to transit any renewed diplomacy that

tackles the details of the core attending issues; refugees, Jerusalem, settlements, settlers, prerogatives of a Palestinian state, water, economics and borders.

Abdullah is similarly requiring from the Israelis what Egyptian President Anwar Sadat demanded of them in his speech in the Israeli Parliament in November 1977: "Complete withdrawal from the Arab territories occupied after 1967." Like the Egyptians did then, the Saudis are promoting a settlement because they see advocacy of the conflict's resolution as morally correct for the Palestinians and a means to curry favor with Washington.

After September 11, the Saudis' severely torn relationship with the United States is in need of repair. It can be significantly refurbished by taking an active role in Arab-Israeli diplomacy. If nothing eventuates from Abdullah's suggestion, the worst result is that the Saudis receive public credit for advocating an agreement. While their ideas are debated and clarified, it is intrinsically more difficult for Washington to strike unilaterally against their neighbor and our nemesis, Saddam Hussein.

By Europeans and many Arabs alike, for staying aloof from deep involvement in Arab-Israeli negotiations, the Bush Administration had been shamelessly blamed for abrogating the role of superpower. After herculean but unsuccessful efforts by the Clinton Administration to force a comprehensive Palestinian-Israeli deal in 2000 (whose most direct result spawned the worst Palestinian-Israeli violence since 1967), why should the next U.S. administration have jumped into smoldering embers?

On the contrary, credit the Bush Administration for not pulling Israeli and Arab coals out of the fire, for letting realities ripen.

American inaction prompted uncharacteristic public Saudi engagement and Sharon's reiteration of necessarily painful Israeli compromises to establish a Palestinian state.

For there to be renewed and prolonged American involvement as mediator, postman, bridge-builder, nudge, guarantor or financier, Israelis, Palestinians and other Arabs must continue to cast aside their dreams and myths. They must educate their respective publics that hard compromises are in order and that vile language spewed about the other must end.

We can provide assistance, but let them shape and revisit the division of land between the river and the sea.

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