

The 'Palestine First' Approach to Middle East Peacemaking Has Been Shattered

The morning after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's first official meeting with President Donald Trump, multiple headlines proclaimed Feb. 16 that the two-state solution—whereby an independent, sovereign Palestinian state would be created alongside the state of Israel within agreed and final borders—was, if not quite dead, fast approaching death's door.

I want to suggest that those who interpret the outcome of the Trump-Bibi meeting in that manner should dig a little deeper. There is something of a revolution in thinking and approach going on, and what's being overturned is what you might call the "Palestine First" strategy of regional peacemaking. But that doesn't have to mean that a solution involving Palestinian sovereignty has been extinguished.

The idea of "Palestine First" was rooted in the mid-1960s, just before the Six-Day War, when Yasser Arafat and his comrades in the Fatah movement took over the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)—until that point, the PLO had been an instrument of the Arab League. By asserting Palestinian independence from Arab collective decision-making, Arafat set the stage for a violent struggle against Israel in the name of Palestinian "return" and full sovereignty from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River.

It took thousands of deaths and several bitter wars for Arafat to realize his armed struggle was doomed to failure. In 1990, the "Palestine First" strategy took a heavy blow when Saddam

Hussein's Ba'athist regime in Iraq invaded Kuwait; an intra-Arab dispute suddenly toppled the Palestinian issue in the hierarchy of Arab priorities. Following the First Gulf War, Israel's representatives met face-to-face with the Arab states and the PLO in Madrid, launching a lengthy, inconclusive peace process.

In parallel, however, the "Palestine First" strategy was resurrected when the Norwegian government opened a secret channel between the Israelis and the PLO, resulting in the 1994 Gaza-Jericho Agreement—a follow-up treaty to the 1993 Oslo Accords—which created the Palestinian Authority (PA) and was designed to set the Palestinians on the road to full statehood. More than 20 years and one brutal civil war later, the Palestinians are still ruled by a divided leadership and not a unified state.

That period includes, of course, the eight years in which President Barack Obama was in office. In marked contrast to his predecessor, George W. Bush, Obama elevated the Palestinian issue to the center of Middle East politics, further antagonizing Israel by rehabilitating Iran, which explicitly seeks the elimination of the Jewish state, as an international actor through the 2015 nuclear deal. But neither Obama nor Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton and John Kerry could deliver on Palestinian statehood, and the Palestinian leadership embarked on an international campaign to seek unilateral recognition of their independence in various United Nations and international agencies.

That embittered and failed strategy, which saw Palestinian representatives verbally assaulting the historical and religious connections of the Jewish people to Jerusalem and the land of Israel, is the principal memory of the Obama years when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian dimension of the region's multiple conflicts. It didn't deliver for anybody and served only to deepen Israeli fears of Palestinian eliminationism, as evidenced on a minute-by-minute basis in

Palestinian school textbooks, on Palestinian TV and across the internet.

This is the environment Trump walked into when he became president. Were Sens. Ted Cruz (R-Texas), Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) or Hillary Clinton, in the White House, I'd wager that they would all conclude—as Trump has, in the language that makes the most sense to him—that the current version of the “Palestine First” playbook should be tossed aside. “I’m looking at two states and one state, and I like the one that both parties like. I can live with either one,” Trump said Feb. 15.

“Palestine First” never meant simply that the Palestinians should rank at the top of the Middle East’s myriad national and religious struggles. In addition, it meant acknowledging that the absence of full Palestinian sovereignty, and the unfulfilled demand for the “return” of all the Arab refugees of the 1948 war and their descendants, lay at the heart of the region’s ills. It is that assumption that was so dramatically exploded by the meeting between Trump and Netanyahu.

The Middle East has gone through several extraordinary transformations in the last 20 years, the cumulative effect of which has been to question whether the current state system in the region can even survive. Nobody can seriously make the argument that creating a Palestinian state in this context would be a boon for peace, neither with Israel nor more broadly. Nobody—save, perhaps, for a racist—could argue that the Palestinian birth rate poses a greater threat to Israel’s existence than does Iran and its Hezbollah ally in Syria and Lebanon. Nobody can make the moral or strategic case that resolving the question of Palestinian independence is of greater import than, say, that of Kurdish independence, the profound lack of religious freedom or the crying need to generate economic and educational opportunities for the youth of the Arab world.

The regional approach to peacemaking outlined by Trump and Netanyahu, grounded in a partnership between Israel and the Sunni Arab states, is foremost a recognition that there are grave problems that run across the borders created in the aftermath of World War I. If Israel is to achieve peace with the Palestinians, and if the Palestinians are to finally turn their authority into something resembling a functional, accountable state, then those Arab states yet to make their own peace with Israel have to lead the way. Doing so will finally unravel the illusion that, simply by existing, Israel is the source of the region's crisis. Should that moment arrive, I hope that everyone—Arabs and Jews alike—will find it liberating. {eo}

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