



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Worse than a Crime: The Folly of Seeking an Imposed Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

by Col. (res.) Dr. Eran Lerman

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The attempt to impose a solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict is worse than a crime; it is a mistake. Even the whiff of coercion deludes the Palestinian leadership and feeds their hope that they can avoid the hard decisions that are necessary for compromise. It also stiffens resistance within Israel to concessions, undermines the legitimacy of any negotiated outcome, and makes implementation all but impossible.

The notion that an externally imposed solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is viable and ultimately in Israel's best interest is sheer folly. It proceeds from a set of wrong assumptions: that the failure to achieve a breakthrough is entirely Israel's fault ("the settlements," etc.); that a short sharp shock is all that would be needed to make Israel "come to its senses;" and that the only reason a solution has not yet been imposed is that Israel has been shielded from the consequences of its policies by powerful friends (mainly in the US).

Each of these false assumptions leads to a false conclusion, and following their logic would be counterproductive. To begin with, while not all Israeli actions and positions over the past two decades have been strategically wise (the structure of the Oslo process comes to mind), much of the responsibility for their failure lies with the Palestinians. The Palestinians continue to glorify and reward violence and cling fervently to the hope that they can achieve statehood on their own terms, without conceding Israel's basic need for

security, and without recognizing the reciprocal legitimacy of the two national movements.

The Palestinians' refusal to accept Israel as the embodiment of the right of the Jewish people for national self-determination – indeed, their refusal to accept that there *is* a Jewish people – undermines what is certainly a basic requirement if peace agreements are to hold.

By advocating coercive pressure on Israel, the would-be "peacemakers" make peace impossible. For any Palestinian leader (particularly a weak and hesitant one), an imposed solution is a painless alternative to the difficult business of negotiating a compromise. Even the hint of such a possibility is enough to persuade Palestinian policymakers that it is better to cast their hopes on international intervention than accept a negotiated outcome.

Saeb Erekat's "Study No. 15" of 2014 (an extensive policy [document](#) in which he advocated a confrontational course and international pressure) is an example. It resulted in the failure of US Secretary of State John Kerry to achieve a breakthrough despite an intense effort by the Obama administration to bring Mahmoud Abbas to the negotiating table.

The second false assumption – that a major international intervention against Israeli interests can force the government into major concessions – is equally dangerous. It is a myopic attempt to upset the status quo. True moral responsibility (which the so-called peace activists claim as their guiding light) requires a sober assessment of what would follow such an intervention. A systemic analysis, going from the end-game backwards, makes the tragic implications of an imposed solution all too obvious.

Coercion advocates need to be reminded of the scale of human, social, economic and political disruption that Israel would face and then consider if this would be exacerbated by external pressure. The only implementing agency for an imposed solution, as was the case in Gaza in 2005, is the IDF, acting in support of a legitimate democratic decision. Such a decision can only be made if a decent compromise, ugly but equitable, has been achieved at the negotiating table. The alternative – that an elected Israeli government should impose great pain on its own people for no reward and under foreign pressure – is a fantasy.

Finally, the oft-heard argument that it is simply "the Lobby" that has prevented the necessary pressure from being brought to bear is equally false, both historically and analytically.

The lack of an imposed solution up to now reflects not political folly but diplomatic wisdom. It has never been attempted because even the most aggressive parties knew it would not work. For Secretary of State James Baker, for example, it was a basic tenet that the US cannot want peace more than the parties themselves. In recent years, there have been encouraging signs that some European leaders have come to the same conclusion.

One episode, long secret, should be mentioned in this context. At the high point of the 1973 war crisis (which coincided with the turning point of the Watergate crisis), President Nixon instructed his secretary of state to reach a coercive understanding with the Soviets that would then be imposed on Israel, regardless of Jewish opinion at home. To his credit, Henry Kissinger flatly refused – not because of domestic or personal concerns, but because he knew it would not work.

When President Carter tried something similar with Leonid Brezhnev in 1977, Anwar Sadat rebelled, bolted, and came to Jerusalem. Sadat understood well what the Palestinians and some Israelis did not: That only a solution accepted by a broad majority of Israelis could be implemented in an effective way.

All this, of course, applies to the decisions the Obama administration will make in its lame duck days. The president will be tempted to "leave a legacy." It would be disastrous to leave one that makes peace less likely.

Col. (res.) Dr. Eran Lerman is a senior research associate at the BESA Center, and former deputy for foreign policy and international affairs at the National Security Council. He is also a member of the faculty at Shalem College.

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