



PERSPECTIVES

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The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Thinking Outside the Box

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A creative solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must start with appreciating the advantages of the hybrid spatial model that has emerged in the West Bank, notably the governmental powers granted to the Palestinian Authority as far back as January 1996 in Areas A and B, and discarding the stillborn paradigm of total separation.

In a recent lecture on the topic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, *New York Times* journalist Thomas Friedman wondered how the highly creative state of Israel had not found a creative solution to the conflict beyond the quest for the best way to separate from the Palestinians.

In order to think outside the box, one has to be familiar with the structure of the box and its intricacies, especially with the lid. As far as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is concerned, four basic assumptions, firmly endorsed by the EU and the US administrations since the days of President Clinton, have kept the box tightly closed:

- The solution to the conflict must be geographically confined to the territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.
- The solution requires the establishment of a fully sovereign Palestinian state.
- The border between Israel and Palestine must be based on the 1967 lines with minor revisions.
- The West Bank and the Gaza Strip must constitute a single political entity.

Leaving no room for negotiations, these four assumptions have led time and again to a dead end. Gaza's economic plight, for example, could have been substantially relieved had Egypt been prepared, with extensive international assistance, to expand the strip into the open spaces of the Sinai desert in the direction of al-Arish.

The prevailing, conventional Israeli and international discourse has placed Israel at a conceptual crossroads between only two possibilities: preserving the Jewish-democratic state by withdrawing to the June 4 lines with small adjustments (that is, retaining the settlement blocs) or ending up with a conflict-ridden, binational state leading inevitably to an apartheid regime. Creative thinking of the kind sought by Friedman should be able to salvage Israel from the trap of having to choose between these polar and impossible alternatives.

The creativity of Einstein's theory of general relativity could provide inspiration for escaping this conceptual fixation. Einstein did not offer new laboratory discoveries. He simply proposed a different general theory in which the invariance of the speed of light becomes a law of nature. In comparable fashion, creative thinking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict entails recognizing that the narrow landmass between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River cannot be divided into two fully-fledged states.

It is not only the Jewish settlements in the West Bank that make it difficult to partition the Land of Israel. The difficulty stems from a range of geophysical factors: communal, ecological, transportation-related, economic, and those involving water, sewage, and electricity infrastructures. The difficulty also arises, of course, from the security aspects of partitioning the land.

Since the time of the September 1993 Oslo Accord, two different models have emerged. In one, situated in the West Bank, the territory in question has been organized - through its division into Areas A, B, and C - into a kind of Palestinian-Israeli coexistence marked by varied forms of governance. The second model, situated in the Gaza Strip, entails a binary division: "They are there, we are here," with a fence, a rigid and uncompromising boundary, between Israel and the Hamas-controlled territory. The path to creative thinking begins with pondering the different patterns of security activity that have emerged in Gaza and the West Bank. In the Gaza model of total separation, Israel's use of military force requires considerable resources: tanks, warplanes, and, from time to time, high-intensity military operations, along with huge investments in counteracting the extensive tunnel network. In the West Bank model, by contrast, security is organized in a hybrid spatial balance with daily meeting points between Israelis and Palestinians, as a dynamic of economic cooperation that includes an Israeli civilian presence makes the

massive use of military power unnecessary. When it comes to quality of life, the West Bank model turns out to be far more beneficial to both sides.

A creative solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must thus start with appreciating the advantages of the hybrid spatial model that has emerged in the West Bank, notably the governmental powers granted to the Palestinian Authority as far back as January 1996 in Areas A and B. Thinking out of the box, then, means discarding the stillborn paradigm of total separation in the West Bank.

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