



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

### The Three-State Solution

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Given Gaza's sharp deterioration over the past 25 years – first under the PA's rule (1994-2007), then under Hamas's control – it is time to consider a new paradigm for resolving the Strip's endemic predicament, and by extension the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. That paradigm could entail a Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip and northern Sinai, from Rafah to El-Arish, with the latter territory leased to the Palestinians on a long-term basis.

When a computer gets stuck, it is usually advisable to shut down and restart. In rethinking the strategic reality produced by the Oslo Accords it may be worthwhile to adopt similar approach: to trace the course of the process from its onset while reexamining its underlying assumptions.

Since the British peacemaking attempts of the 1930s, it was taken for granted that the Arab-Jewish conflict problem would be resolved within the boundaries of Mandatory Palestine. In line with this thinking, the Peel Commission proposed in July 1937 to partition the land west of the Jordan River into two separate entities: a Jewish state, and an Arab state that would be united with Transjordan (then ruled by Emir, later King, Abdullah of Mecca).

From then on, the two-state solution was established as the predominant paradigm whereby the various Arab territories and rival factions would be constituted into one Arab state (for his part, Abdullah considered himself ruler of this entity on both sides of the Jordan).

This was also the underlying premise of the Oslo Accords. But after Israel's final withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2005 and Hamas's takeover of the area, a new reality was created. By controlling a defined stretch of territory and its population and having all the trappings of military, administrative, and political power, Hamas has turned the Gaza Strip into a *de*

*facto* state. The ensuing disconnect between the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Hamas government in Gaza has created an ever-widening fissure in the two-state paradigm as the Palestinians have split into two *de facto* state entities.

It will never be fully known where Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was headed in the summer of 2005, or what his long-term strategic expectations of the Gaza unilateral disengagement were. But that move produced a sea change that fundamentally transformed the strategic reality by creating a complete spatial separation from Israel enforced by a strident security regime, in stark contrast to the hybrid system of partial separation and coexistence that prevails in the West Bank.

On the one hand, the Jewish and Palestinian populations (especially the Palestinians living in Areas A and B, which are a *de facto* state) live in separate spaces, while on the other, there is multifaceted coexistence and collaboration in the security and economic spheres, among others. Over 100,000 Palestinians work daily in Israel, in addition to the tens of thousands working in Jewish communities and factories in the West Bank. A critical examination of the fundamental differences between these two paradigms can perhaps provide a key to addressing the difficult problem of the Gaza Strip.

### **Thinking spatially outside the box: connecting Gaza to northern Sinai**

Gaza's total separation from the West Bank has created a new opportunity for Israel, the Palestinians, and the international community to rethink the Oslo concept about regulating the narrow space between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

Since the completion of Israel's withdrawal from the West Bank's populated areas (A and B) in January 1996, the PA's governing centers have been based in Ramallah and focused on administering the affairs of those territories, with the Gaza Strip reduced to a peripheral role. Yet notwithstanding the disconnect between Ramallah and Gaza, the international community continues to view the PA as the address for handling Gaza's affairs, ignoring altogether the Hamas government formed in the wake of the organization's sweeping victory in the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections.

Reflecting the staying power of a hegemonic paradigm even when the facts on the ground no longer correspond to its underlying assumptions, this outlook preserves the two basic premises of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: the necessity for two states within the boundaries of the former Mandatory Palestine; and the existence of only one Palestinian entity.

Accepting that something fundamental has changed and that there are effectively two separate Palestinian entities, it is time to consider an alternative paradigm. Neither the PA nor Mahmoud Abbas will ever solve the problems of Gaza. In seeking to resolve the Strip's endemic predicament, Israel and the international community must shift the center of gravity from Ramallah to Gaza itself.

Since the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement of 1979, which left Gaza under Israel's control, the Strip has become dependent on Israel in all walks of life, and its available space for growth and development has been constrained by Israel to the north and east and Egypt to the west. Under these circumstances, and given Gaza's sharp deterioration over the past 25 years – first under the PA's rule (1994-2007), then under Hamas's control – it is time to consider a new paradigm for resolving the Strip's problems, and by extension the Palestinian-Israeli conflict: a Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip and northern Sinai, from Rafah to El-Arish, with the latter territory leased to the Palestinians on a long-term basis.

In practice, the hybrid West Bank paradigm, comprising extensive and multifaceted economic and security Israel-PA ties, could serve as a model for a similar relationship between the Hamas state in Gaza and Egypt. The open space between Rafah and El-Arish, which is in the hands of Egypt, can offer the Strip the economic and infrastructure living space it needs.

Such a sea change would of course be entirely dependent on the consent of Egypt, which may not be eager to relinquish even a tiny part of its sovereign territory. Yet it is possible to find creative means that do not necessarily require concessions over sovereignty and that will grant Egypt substantial benefits (via massive international aid) that may ease its own economic plight. Likewise, Hamas can hardly be expected to abandon its dream of a state from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea; but with the internationally supported expansion of the Gaza state into northern Sinai, and the attendant economic revival it is likely to produce, some positive dynamics within the Palestinian population may well evolve.

Open spaces often present unrealized opportunities. Sinai is an opportunity awaiting a comprehensive initiative for the benefit of all the peoples of the region.

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