

# Imposing Middle East Peace

Forceful outside intervention is the only alternative to an unstable and dangerous status quo.

by HENRY SIEGMAN

Israel's relentless drive to establish "facts on the ground" in the occupied West Bank, a drive that continues in violation of even the limited settlement freeze to which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu committed himself, seems finally to have succeeded in locking in the irreversibility of its colonial project. As a result of that "achievement," one that successive Israeli governments have long sought in order to preclude the possibility of a two-state solution, Israel has crossed the threshold from "the only democracy in the Middle East" to the only apartheid regime in the Western world.

The inevitability of such a transformation has been held out not by "Israel bashers" but by the country's own leaders. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon referred to that danger, as did Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who warned that Israel could not escape turning into an apartheid state if it did not relinquish "almost all the territories, if not all," including the Arab parts of East Jerusalem.

Olmert ridiculed Israeli defense strategists who, he said, had learned nothing from past experiences and were stuck in the mindset of the 1948 war of independence. "With them, it is all about tanks and land and controlling territories and controlled territories and this hilltop and that hilltop," he said. "All these things are worthless. Who thinks seriously that if we sit on another hilltop, on another hundred meters, that this is what will make the difference for the State of Israel's basic security?"

It is now widely recognized in most Israeli circles—although denied by Israel's government—that the settlements have become so widespread and so deeply implanted in the West Bank as to rule out the possibility of their removal (except for a few isolated and sparsely populated ones) by this or any future Israeli government unless compelled to do so by international intervention, an eventuality until now considered entirely unlikely.

It is not only the settlements' proliferation and size that have made their dismantlement impossible. Equally decisive have been the influence of Israel's settler-security-industrial complex, which conceived and implemented this policy; the recent disappearance of a viable pro-peace political party in Israel; and the infiltration by settlers and their supporters in the religious-national camp into key leadership positions in Israel's security and military establishments.



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Olmert was mistaken in one respect, for he said Israel would turn into an apartheid state when the Arab population in Greater Israel outnumbers the Jewish population. But the relative size of the populations is not the decisive factor in such a transition. Rather, the turning point comes when a state denies national self-determination to a part of its population—even one that is in the minority—to which it has also denied the rights of citizenship.

When a state's denial of the individual and national rights of a large part of its population becomes permanent, it ceases to be a democracy. When the reason for that double disenfranchisement is that population's ethnic and religious identity, the state is practicing a form of apartheid, or racism, not much different from the one that characterized South Africa from 1948 to 1994. The democratic dispensation that Israel provides for its mostly Jewish citizens cannot hide its changed character. By definition, democracy reserved for privileged citizens—while all others are kept behind checkpoints, barbed-wire fences and separation walls commanded by the Israeli army—is not democracy but its opposite.

The Jewish settlements and their supporting infrastructure, which span the West Bank from east to west and north to south, are not a wild growth, like weeds in a garden. They have been carefully planned, financed and protected by successive Israeli governments and Israel's military. Their purpose has been to deny the Palestinian people independence and statehood—or to put it more precisely, to retain Israeli control of Palestine "from the river to the sea," an objective that precludes the existence of a viable and sovereign Palestinian state east of Israel's pre-1967 border.

A vivid recollection from the time I headed the American Jewish Congress is a helicopter trip over the West Bank on which I was taken by Ariel Sharon. With large, worn maps in hand, he pointed out to me strategic locations of present and future settlements on east-west and north-south axes that, Sharon assured me, would rule out a future Palestinian state.

Just one year after the 1967 war, Moshe Dayan, then defense minister, described Israel's plan for the future of the territories as "the current reality." "The plan is being implemented in actual fact," he said. "What exists today must remain as a permanent arrangement in the West Bank." Ten years later, at a conference in Tel Aviv whose theme was finding a solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, Dayan said: "The question is not, What is the solution? but, How do we live without a solution?"

Prime Minister Netanyahu's conditions for Palestinian statehood would leave under Israel's control Palestine's international borders and airspace, as well as the entire Jordan Valley; would

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leave most of the settlers in place; and would fragment the contiguity of the territory remaining for such a state. His conditions would also deny Palestinians even those parts of East Jerusalem that Israel unilaterally annexed to the city immediately following the 1967 war—land that had never been part of Jerusalem before the war. In other words, Netanyahu's conditions for Palestinian statehood would meet Dayan's goal of leaving Israel's de facto occupation in place.

From Dayan's prescription for the permanence of the status quo to Netanyahu's prescription for a two-state solution, Israel has lived "without a solution," not because of uncertainty or neglect but as a matter of deliberate policy, clandestinely driving settlement expansion to the point of irreversibility while pretending to search for "a Palestinian partner for peace."

Sooner or later the White House, Congress and the American public—not to speak of a Jewish establishment that is largely out of touch with the younger Jewish generation's changing perceptions of Israel's behavior—will have to face the fact that America's "special relationship" with Israel is sustaining a colonial enterprise.

President Barack Obama's capitulation to Netanyahu on the settlement freeze was widely seen as the collapse of the latest hope for achievement of a two-state agreement. It thoroughly discredited the notion that Palestinian moderation is the path to statehood, and therefore also discredited Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, moderation's leading Palestinian advocate, who announced his intention not to run in the coming presidential elections.

Netanyahu's "limited" freeze was described by the Obama administration as "unprecedented," even though the exceptions to it—3,000 housing units whose foundations had supposedly already been laid, public buildings and unlimited construction in East Jerusalem—brought total construction to where it would have been without a freeze. Indeed, Netanyahu assured the settler leadership and his cabinet that construction will resume after the ten-month freeze—according to minister Benny Begin, at a rate "faster and more than before"—even if Abbas agrees to return to talks. In fact, the Israeli press has reported that the freeze notwithstanding, new construction in the settlements is "booming." None of this has elicited the Obama administration's public rebuke, much less the kinds of sanctions imposed on Palestinians when they violate agreements.

**B**ut what is widely believed to have been the final blow to a two-state solution may in fact turn out to be the necessary condition for its eventual achievement. That condition is abandonment of the utterly wrongheaded idea that a Palestinian state can arise without forceful outside intervention. The international community has shown signs of exasperation with Israel's deceptions and stonewalling, and also with Washington's failure to demonstrate that there are consequences not only for Palestinian violations of agreements but for Israeli ones as well. The last thing many in the international community want is a resumption of predictably meaningless negotiations between Netanyahu and Abbas.

Instead, they are focusing on forceful third-party intervention, a concept that is no longer taboo.

Ironically, it is Netanyahu who now insists on the resumption of peace talks. For him, a prolonged breakdown of talks risks exposing the irreversibility of the settlements, and therefore the loss of Israel's democratic character, and legitimizing outside intervention as the only alternative to an unstable and dangerous status quo. While the Obama administration may be reluctant to support such initiatives, it may no longer wish to block them.

These are not fanciful fears. Israeli chiefs of military intelligence, the Shin Bet and other defense officials told Netanyahu's security cabinet on December 9 that the stalled peace process has led to a dangerous vacuum "into which a number of different states are putting their own initiatives, none of which are in Israel's favor." They stressed that "the fact that the US has also reached a dead-end in its efforts only worsens the problem."

If these fears are realized and the international community

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abandons a moribund peace process in favor of determined third-party initiatives, a two-state outcome may yet be possible. A recent proposal by the Swedish presidency of the European Union is perhaps the first indication of the international community's determination to react more meaningfully to Netanyahu's intransigence. The proposal, adopted by the EU's foreign ministers on December 8, reaffirmed an earlier declaration of the European Council that the EU would not recognize unilateral Israeli changes in the pre-1967 borders. The resolution also opposes Israeli measures to deny a prospective Palestinian state any presence in Jerusalem. The statement's endorsement of PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad's two-year institution-building initiative suggests a future willingness to act favorably on a Palestinian declaration of statehood following the initiative's projected completion. In her first pronouncement on the Israel-Palestine conflict as the EU's new high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Baroness Catherine Ashton declared, "We cannot and nor, I doubt, can the region tolerate another round of fruitless negotiations."

An imposed solution has risks, but these do not begin to compare with the risks of the conflict's unchecked continuation. Furthermore, since the adversaries are not being asked to accept anything they have not already committed themselves to in formal accords, the international community is not imposing its own ideas but insisting the parties live up to existing obligations. That kind of intervention, or "imposition," is hardly unprecedented; it is the daily fare of international diplomacy. It defines America's relations with allies and unfriendly countries alike.

It would not take extraordinary audacity for Obama to reaffirm the official position of every previous US administration—including that of George W. Bush—that no matter how desirable or necessary certain changes in the pre-1967 status

may seem, they cannot be made unilaterally. Even Bush, celebrated in Israel as “the best American president Israel ever had,” stated categorically that this inviolable principle applies even to the settlement blocs that Israel insists it will annex. Speaking of these blocs at a May 2005 press conference, Bush affirmed that “changes to the 1949 armistice lines must be mutually agreed to,” a qualification largely ignored by Israeli governments (and by Bush himself). The next year Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was even more explicit. She stated that “the president did say that at the time of final status, it will be necessary to take into account new realities on the ground that have changed since 1967, but under no circumstances...should anyone try and do that in a pre-emptive or predetermined way, because these are issues for negotiation at final status.”

Of course, Obama should leave no doubt that it is inconceivable for the United States not to be fully responsive to Israel’s genuine security needs, no matter how displeased it

may be with a particular Israeli government’s policies. But he must also leave no doubt that it is equally inconceivable he would abandon America’s core values or compromise its strategic interests to keep Netanyahu’s government in power, particularly when support for this government means supporting a regime that would permanently disenfranchise and dispossess the Palestinian people.

In short, Middle East peacemaking efforts will continue to fail, and the possibility of a two-state solution will disappear, if US policy continues to ignore developments on the ground in the occupied territories and within Israel, which now can be reversed only through outside intervention. President Obama is uniquely positioned to help Israel reclaim Jewish and democratic ideals on which the state was founded—if he does not continue “politics as usual.” But was it not his promise to reject just such a politics that swept Obama into the presidency and captured the amazement and respect of the entire world? ■