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Two-State Illusion

By IAN S. LUSTICK

THE last three decades are littered with the carcasses of failed negotiating projects billed as the last chance for peace in Israel. All sides have been wedded to the notion that there must be two states, one Palestinian and one Israeli. For more than 30 years, experts and politicians have warned of a “point of no return.” Secretary of State John Kerry is merely the latest in a long line of well-meaning American diplomats wedded to an idea whose time is now past.

True believers in the two-state solution see absolutely no hope elsewhere. With no alternative in mind, and unwilling or unable to rethink their basic assumptions, they are forced to defend a notion whose success they can no longer sincerely portray as plausible or even possible.

It’s like 1975 all over again, when the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco fell into a coma. The news media began a long death watch, announcing each night that Generalissimo Franco was still not dead. This desperate allegiance to the departed echoes in every speech, policy brief and op-ed about the two-state solution today.

True, some comas miraculously end. Great surprises sometimes happen. The problem is that the changes required to achieve the vision of robust Israeli and Palestinian states living side by side are now considerably less likely than other less familiar but more plausible outcomes that demand high-level attention but aren’t receiving it.

Strong Islamist trends make a fundamentalist Palestine more likely than a small state under a secular government. The disappearance of Israel as a Zionist project, through war, cultural exhaustion or demographic momentum, is at least as plausible as the evacuation of enough of the half-million Israelis living across the 1967 border, or Green Line, to allow a real Palestinian state to exist. While the vision of thriving Israeli and Palestinian states has slipped from the plausible to the barely possible, one mixed state emerging from prolonged and violent struggles over democratic rights is no longer inconceivable. Yet the fantasy that there is a two-state solution keeps everyone from taking action toward something that might work.

All sides have reasons to cling to this illusion. The Palestinian Authority needs to believe that progress is being made toward a two-state solution so it can continue to receive economic aid and diplomatic support that subsidize the lifestyles of its leaders, of thousands of soldiers, spies, police officers and civil servants, and the author



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in a Palestinian society that views it as corrupt and incompetent.

Israeli governments cling to the two-state notion because it seems to reflect the sentiments of the Jewish Israeli majority and it shields the country from international opprobrium, even as it camouflages relentless efforts to expand Israel's territory into the West Bank.

American politicians need the two-state slogan to show they are working toward a diplomatic solution, to keep the pro-Israel lobby from turning against them and to disguise their humiliating inability to allow any daylight between Washington and the Israeli government.

Finally, the "peace process" industry — with its legions of consultants, pundits, academics and journalists — needs a steady supply of readers, listeners and funders who are either desperately worried that this latest round of talks will lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state, or that it will not.

Conceived as early as the 1930s, the idea of two states between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea all but disappeared from public consciousness between 1948 and 1967. Between 1967 and 1973 it re-emerged, advanced by a minority of "moderates" in each community. By the 1990s it was embraced by majorities on both sides as not only possible but, during the height of the Oslo peace process, probable. But failures of leadership in the face of tremendous pressures brought Oslo crashing down. These days no one suggests that a negotiated two-state "solution" is probable. The most optimistic insist that, for some brief period, it may still be conceivable.

But many Israelis see the demise of the country as not just possible, but probable. The State of Israel has been established, not its permanence. The most common phrase in Israeli political discourse is some variation of "If X happens (or doesn't), the state will not survive!" Those who assume that Israel will always exist as a Zionist project should consider how quickly the Soviet, Pahlavi Iranian, apartheid South African, Baathist Iraqi and Yugoslavian states unraveled, and how little warning even sharp-eyed observers had that such transformations were imminent.

In all these cases, presumptions about what was "impossible" helped protect brittle institutions by limiting political imagination. And when objective realities began to diverge dramatically from official common sense, immense pressures accumulated.

JUST as a balloon filled gradually with air bursts when the limit of its tensile strength is passed, there are thresholds of radical, disruptive change in politics. When those thresholds are crossed, the impossible suddenly becomes probable, with revolutionary implications for governments and nations. As we see vividly across the Middle East, when forces for change and new ideas are stifled as completely and for as long as they have been in the Israel-Palestinian conflict, sudden

and jagged change becomes increasingly likely.

History offers many such lessons. Britain ruled Ireland for centuries, annexing it in 1801. By the mid-19th century the entire British political class treated Ireland's permanent incorporation as a fact of life. But bottled-up Irish fury produced repeated revolts. By the 1880s, the Irish question was the greatest issue facing the country; it led to mutiny in the army and near civil war before World War I. Once the war ended, it took only a few years until the establishment of an independent Ireland. What was inconceivable became a fact.

France ruled Algeria for 130 years and never questioned the future of Algeria as an integral part of France. But enormous pressures accumulated, exploding into a revolution that left hundreds of thousands dead. Despite France's military victory over the rebels in 1959, Algeria soon became independent, and Europeans were evacuated from the country.

And when Mikhail S. Gorbachev sought to save Soviet Communism by reforming it with the policies of glasnost and perestroika, he relied on the people's continuing belief in the permanence of the Soviet structure. But the forces for change that had already accumulated were overwhelming. Unable to separate freedom of expression and market reforms from the rest of the Soviet state project, Mr. Gorbachev's policies pushed the system beyond its breaking point. Within a few years, both the Soviet Union and the Communist regime were gone.

Obsessive focus on preserving the theoretical possibility of a two-state solution is as irrational as rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic rather than steering clear of icebergs. But neither ships in the night nor the State of Israel can avoid icebergs unless they are seen.

The two-state slogan now serves as a comforting blindfold of entirely contradictory fantasies. The current Israeli version of two states envisions Palestinian refugees abandoning their sacred "right of return," an Israeli-controlled Jerusalem and an archipelago of huge Jewish settlements, crisscrossed by Jewish-only access roads. The Palestinian version imagines the return of refugees, evacuation of almost all settlements and East Jerusalem as the Palestinian capital.

DIPLOMACY under the two-state banner is no longer a path to a solution but an obstacle itself. We are engaged in negotiations to nowhere. And this isn't the first time that American diplomats have obstructed political progress in the name of hopeless talks.

In 1980, I was a 30-year-old assistant professor, on leave from Dartmouth at the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research. I was responsible for analyzing Israeli settlement and land expropriation policies in the West Bank and their implications for the "autonomy negotiations" under way at that time between Israel, Egypt and the United States.

It was clear to me that Prime Minister Menachem Begin's government was systematically using tangled talks over how to conduct negotiations as camouflage for de facto annexation of the West Bank via intensive settlement construction, land expropriation and encouragement of "voluntary" Arab emigration.

To protect the peace process, the United States strictly limited its public criticism of Israeli government policies, making Washington an enabler for the very processes of de facto annexation that were destroying prospects for the full autonomy and realization of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people that were the official purpose of the negotiations. This view was endorsed and promoted by some leading voices within the administration. Unsurprisingly, it angered others. One day I was summoned to the office of a high-ranking diplomat, who was then one of the State Department's most powerful advocates for the negotiations. He was a man I had always respected and admired. "Are you," he asked me, "personally so sure of your analysis that you are willing to destroy the only available chance for peace between Israelis and Palestinians?" His question gave me pause, but only briefly. "Yes, sir," I answered, "I am."

I still am. Had America blown the whistle on destructive Israeli policies back then it might have greatly enhanced prospects for peace under a different leader. It could have prevented Mr. Begin's narrow electoral victory in 1981 and brought a government to power that was ready to negotiate seriously with the Palestinians before the first or second intifada and before the construction of massive settlement complexes in the West Bank. We could have had an Oslo process a crucial decade earlier.

Now, as then, negotiations are phony; they suppress information that Israelis, Palestinians and Americans need to find noncatastrophic paths into the future. The issue is no longer where to draw political boundaries between Jews and Arabs on a map but how equality of political rights is to be achieved. The end of the 1967 Green Line as a demarcation of potential Israeli and Palestinian sovereignty means that Israeli occupation of the West Bank will stigmatize all of Israel.

For some, abandoning the two-state mirage may feel like the end of the world. But it is not. Israel may no longer exist as the Jewish and democratic vision of its Zionist founders. The Palestine Liberation Organization stalwarts in Ramallah may not strut on the stage of a real Palestinian state. But these lost futures can make others more likely.

THE assumptions necessary to preserve the two-state slogan have blinded us to more likely scenarios. With a status but no role, what remains of the Palestinian Authority will disappear. Israel will face the stark challenge of controlling economic and political activity and all land and

water resources from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. The stage will be set for ruthless oppression, mass mobilization, riots, brutality, terror, Jewish and Arab emigration and rising tides of international condemnation of Israel. And faced with growing outrage, America will no longer be able to offer unconditional support for Israel. Once the illusion of a neat and palatable solution to the conflict disappears, Israeli leaders may then begin to see, as South Africa's white leaders saw in the late 1980s, that their behavior is producing isolation, emigration and hopelessness.

Fresh thinking could then begin about Israel's place in a rapidly changing region. There could be generous compensation for lost property. Negotiating with Arabs and Palestinians based on satisfying their key political requirements, rather than on maximizing Israeli prerogatives, might yield more security and legitimacy. Perhaps publicly acknowledging Israeli mistakes and responsibility for the suffering of Palestinians would enable the Arab side to accept less than what it imagines as full justice. And perhaps Israel's potent but essentially unusable nuclear weapons arsenal could be sacrificed for a verified and strictly enforced W.M.D.-free zone in the Middle East.

Such ideas cannot even be entertained as long as the chimera of a negotiated two-state solution monopolizes all attention. But once the two-state-fantasy blindfolds are off, politics could make strange bedfellows.

In such a radically new environment, secular Palestinians in Israel and the West Bank could ally with Tel Aviv's post-Zionists, non-Jewish Russian-speaking immigrants, foreign workers and global-village Israeli entrepreneurs. Anti-nationalist ultra-Orthodox Jews might find common cause with Muslim traditionalists. Untethered to statist Zionism in a rapidly changing Middle East, Israelis whose families came from Arab countries might find new reasons to think of themselves not as "Eastern," but as Arab. Masses of downtrodden and exploited Muslim and Arab refugees, in Gaza, the West Bank and in Israel itself could see democracy, not Islam, as the solution for translating what they have (numbers) into what they want (rights and resources). Israeli Jews committed above all to settling throughout the greater Land of Israel may find arrangements based on a confederation, or a regional formula more attractive than narrow Israeli nationalism.

It remains possible that someday two real states may arise. But the pretense that negotiations under the slogan of "two states for two peoples" could lead to such a solution must be abandoned. Time can do things that politicians cannot.

Just as an independent Ireland emerged by seceding 120 years after it was formally incorporated into the United Kingdom, so, too, a single state might be the route to eventual

Palestinian independence. But such outcomes develop organically; they are not implemented by diplomats overnight and they do not arise without the painful stalemates that lead each party to conclude that time is not on their side.

Peacemaking and democratic state building require blood and magic. The question is not whether the future has conflict in store for Israel-Palestine. It does. Nor is the question whether conflict can be prevented. It cannot. But avoiding truly catastrophic change means ending the stifling reign of an outdated idea and allowing both sides to see and then adapt to the world as it is.

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