Breaking the deadlock
A four-point plan to reverse the current slide towards a one-state reality

US SECRETARY of State John Kerry’s resounding failure to conclude a final peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians has left both parties facing crisis and deadlock without attractive alternatives. On both sides there is talk of “Plan B,” but in both cases the ideas on the table are highly unrealistic.

The Palestinian Plan B is to use UN recognition of Palestinian statehood to mobilize international pressure on Israel. The idea is to join a wide range of international treaties, conventions and organizations, thereby demonstrating widespread recognition of Palestine and expanding jurisdiction of the conventions to the occupied territories with potential legal complications for Israel.

But although success on this front may give the Palestinians a degree of emotional satisfaction, do they really believe it will force Israel out of the occupied territories?

The Israeli discourse also focuses mostly on unrealistic unilateral moves. There are two versions. The center-left calls for unilateral implementation of the two-state solution through withdrawal from most of the West Bank; the right urges unilateral implementation of the vision of Greater Israel through annexation of most of the West Bank.

But given the composition of the current Israeli government, both versions are extremely implausible. It is difficult to imagine Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—who was incapable of even presenting a position on borders between Israel and Palestine for fear his coalition would collapse—turning unilaterally and evicting tens of thousands of settlers; similarly it is hard to see the same timorous Netanyahu daring to provoke the international community, including the US, by annexing territories.

Therefore, it seems the best way forward for both parties is still through negotiations. But they need to be visibly more effective and not perceived as endless talks leading nowhere. There is wide recognition that one of the major obstacles to success up till now has been deep mutual distrust between Israelis and Palestinians. For new talks to take off, this core problem needs to be addressed.

One way to do so would be to create a mechanism, which clearly demonstrates that the political process is not merely bluster, but entails a consistent reversal of the current slide towards a one-state reality. This can only be realized through a broader negotiating framework with more realistic goals.

It should include four key elements:

• Resumption of the American-mediated permanent-status talks, but, this time, based on clear terms of reference—These should reflect the general principles of a final peace treaty and should basically be dictated by the US.
• A process of gradual change on the ground based on previous commitments and new interim agreements—This should include the gradual transfer of territories and powers to the Palestinian side, without waiting for the final resolution of all issues in a full-fledged peace treaty. For example, “further redeployment” of Israeli forces, or speedy agreement on water distribution, which could be implemented immediately.
• Limited, coordinated unilateral steps taken when it becomes easier for the two parties to cooperate
• Support of the Arab world in the building of the Palestinian state and achieving wider reconciliation with Israel, based on the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002.

Such a multi-pronged process may be effective and realistic. It has a lot going for it. It is gradual and does not demand risk-taking from the outset; and it gives each party elements of what they want as they go along, building trust through the process itself.

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