
POLICY ESSAY

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Division by Addition Why a Three-State Solution Is Better than Two

As the curtain lifts on the latest installment of the Middle East's version of a Greek tragedy, it seems that we've seen this act before. Hamas and Fatah continue to struggle for power, occasionally engaging in skirmishes in the West Bank and jockeying for position and influence on the Palestinian people. Indeed, on the surface, most of the components to this all too familiar play remain static.

In Gaza, the setting is the same. The characters are largely similar, except in this act Iran has taken on a more nefarious role, most likely to deflect attention from its ongoing nuclear program and recent election turmoil. The plot will likely follow previous formats. Israeli politicians will compete for the position of most hawkish against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu while Hamas leaders defiantly proclaim a "divine" victory in a bold attempt to become the undisputed powerbroker of Palestinian domestic politics. Still, the greatest opportunity for change is the possibility to introduce a new dialogue.

By placing the settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at the heart of his Cairo speech, President Obama has acknowledged that resolving this issue is one of the lynchpins of stability in the Middle East. Yet, a terrorist organization is governing Gaza while Israel continues to build settlements in the West Bank, making chances of a peace deal in the near future highly unlikely.

To be sure, many of the arguments for resolving this seemingly intractable conflict are well-worn and hackneyed. To achieve progress, President Obama would be wise to look beyond the once heralded "two-state solution" and begin wrestling with a more controversial but more logical three-state

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solution to the Middle East's woes – a solution borne from the violence surrounding India's 1947 partition.

The idea that one nation can remain intact when its territory is non-contiguous has no real precedent in recent history. Just as East and West Pakistan fought a bloody war in 1971 that resulted in the formation of Bangladesh and Pakistan, so too will any attempt to link Gaza and the West Bank as a united 'Palestine' fail miserably.

While the distance between Gaza and the West Bank is only 25 miles, much shorter than the distance between the former East and West Pakistan, the problems each territory will face are similar to those that required a three-state solution in the Asian sub-continent. First, in the Middle East, just as was the case with India, both territories are separated by a hostile neighbor in the middle. Second, for all the criticism of Yasser Arafat, the Palestinians presented a more united front under the banner of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Today, with two very distinct entities vying for the hearts and minds of the Palestinian people, a fissure has emerged with the potential to develop into a chasm. Palestinian politics have become polarized, as Hamas casts itself as the champion of Islamic values while Fatah seeks to be identified with modernity and progress.

Perhaps most problematic, there is a significant rift between the leadership of both major forces that assert authority to govern the bi-furcated territories. Specifically, Fatah and Hamas adamantly disagree over the question of recognizing Israel. If the current relationship between Fatah and Hamas is any indication, an all out conflagration will come much sooner than the 24 years it took in South Asia.

And those are just the troubling dynamics fueled by physical distance. As recent press accounts have noted, the gap between Palestinians living in the West Bank and those in Hamas-controlled Gaza is growing wider by the day. In Gaza, more women don hijabs, more men wear beard relative to those in the West Banks. In Gaza the police is enforcing Islamic moral codes. Meanwhile, a movie theatre in the West Bank city of Nablus opened this past June (the first in two decades) and music stores blare love songs from speakers without interference from Islamic moral police.

On the economic front, the divisions are even more pronounced. Last year in the West Bank, \$2 billion in project proposals were put forth at the Palestine Investment Conference, a three-day event focused around business opportunities in tourism, finance, and information technology. Moreover, the International Monetary Fund is forecasting a seven percent

growth rate for the West Bank in 2009, particularly encouraging given the current state of the global economy. In Gaza, by contrast, the economy revolves around agriculture and basic commerce, with Israeli-monitored smuggling tunnels into Egypt serving as one of the few economic lifelines to this depressed territory.

A three-state solution offers something to all three parties. Israel can feel that it has achieved a greater degree of security with a secular, modern, and separate West Bank on its flank – improving relations with Fatah while further marginalizing the armed thugs in Gaza. For its part, Fatah will receive ownership of a newly liberated West Bank and access to foreign aid. And Hamas will get control of the reins of power in Gaza, allowing it to continue creating a traditional Palestinian society.

By creating two Palestinian states, the international community can isolate the extremists in Gaza, while affording the West Bank an opportunity to grow. A three-state solution would put Gaza in direct competition with the West Bank, and Hamas would be forced to govern or risk becoming the rump of the region.

Again, the Pakistan-Bangladesh analogy is apt, as the former has become a bastion of radicalism, while the latter has become a moderate Islamist state. The former continues to destabilize Afghanistan and poses a pernicious threat to international security, while the latter maintains friendly relations with its neighbors and pursues a moderate foreign policy characterized by multinational diplomacy. But this same situation is not a *fait accompli* in the Middle East. With sustained engagement from the international community—and a judicious balance of carrots and sticks—Hamas could be coaxed and cajoled into following Fatah’s blueprint for success. There is little doubt that Hamas leaders will feel the pressure to replicate any success joined by their erstwhile allies. As such, Gaza’s descent into anarchy is not preordained.

For all of the suffering and misery experienced by both sides in this most recent battle, the current conflict between Israel and Hamas presents an opening to the global community. Only sustained engagement by international players can help bring about a negotiated settlement. The benefit of a three state solution is that it contains the radical inclinations to Gaza before Hamas can further lay its roots in the West Bank and extend its growing appeal into traditional Fatah strongholds including Nablus and Beit Jala. The main disadvantage, however, is that separating the Palestinians into two discrete enclaves risks marginalizing one faction or another, especially as economic development is likely to progress at

different rates. Furthermore, there is the possibility of a civil war between Hamas and Fatah and their respective constituencies. This kind of conflict could engulf other actors in the region, leading to a wider war involving multiple sides. Finally, since the proposed division is based on political parties and the support they currently receive, there always remains the possibility that the political equation could shift in the future.

Of course, there is also still the issue of whether Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas would be willing to cede Gaza to Hamas. And despite murmurings that Hamas is fed up with the governing business and may seek to revert back to its role as the populist opposition, there have been no concrete signs to this end. Nevertheless, the Obama administration might have the political leverage to move beyond the current morass by providing both sides with a rare opportunity—a fresh start in an otherwise stale conflict. Maybe it's time for each group to put political ambitions aside for the good of their people.

Why should most Palestinians continue to suffer for the intransigence of a few?