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Middle East

The fruits of denial

by John Bell

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MADRID – On 5 June 1967, Israel invaded Egypt and conquered the Sinai Peninsula. This victory, alongside the capture of the Golan, the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, led to the concept of "land for peace", the idea that Israel could exchange these territories for permanent peace with its Arab neighbours. This bedrock political concept has framed all discussions between the sides, defined an era and resulted in a treaty between Israel and Egypt.

Unfortunately, the reality on the ground in the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem has been very different. Other concepts than "land for peace" have configured the political landscape during those last forty years. Israeli settlement of the West Bank and East Jerusalem alongside the failure to create an independent Palestinian state has threatened the viability of the land-for-peace formula. In parallel, the failure to win the revolution or the peace also led to the demise of Fatah as the political leader of the Palestinian people and the conversion of the Palestinian resistance from Fatah and the PLO to Hamas.

These unfortunate fruits of the political incompetence and mismanagement of the era of land for peace – Hamas and settlements – now represent a serious threat to an end of conflict.

With the Palestinians, Israel has missed the opportunity for "land for peace" created by the 1967 war. Instead of settling with its neighbours, it created realities that raise serious questions about future borders, state sovereignty and two clearly defined nation-states—the very notions behind "land for peace". Instead, settlements and Hamas ironically presage a new regionalism. Settlements connect Israelis to Palestinians in intricate ways, as does Jerusalem, and Hamas is an Islamic movement ideologically and infrastructurally connected to regional political movements.

Indeed, there is a reality of interconnectivity between the parts of the Middle East. Gaza must be inextricably connected to Egypt, the West Bank, and Israel in order to thrive; and in the West Bank and Jerusalem, Israelis and Palestinians are enmeshed together.

The problem lies in the denial of this interconnectivity and the resort to another form of communication: violence, to resolve disputes. The Middle East is not only about what belongs to whom but about how the sides in fact relate to each other in this interconnected scenario, through violence or other means. Critical issues for life such as water and land, and matters laden with symbolism, such as Jerusalem, are already shared, but terribly ineffectively.

Separate sovereignties will still be necessary conditions to assuage the national appetites of both sides, but these two states will require inventive common arrangements and establishment of links with the rest of the Middle East in order to reflect today's realities.

The two-state solution, if it ever sees the light of day, will now have to contend with the fact that the two states will require a high degree of permeability to survive and thrive, i.e. to be real.

Movement permeability will mean access for settlers into Israel and access for Palestinians to Jerusalem as well as economic permeability for Gaza. Furthermore, the key to longstanding peace will not be two road systems, concrete barriers and security controls, but a framework of equitability between the two sides to frame their common ground. Intermeshed as they are, Israelis and Palestinians will need to live on terms that are fair and equal to both, which means a very significant shift of mental patterns.

The marathon of talks between Israelis and Palestinians over the past decades may have failed because the option of violence for both sides, fuelled by denial, was always there. The decision to pursue new forms of communication over critical issues was never fully made and the basic denial of the other continued. Unfortunately, in the Middle East, talks cannot succeed unless this bold decision is taken and the limits put on the radicals overruling it. These are not words or vague concepts but the very bedrock on which talks should be based: something more basic than "land for peace"—a recognition of the needs of the other in the current reality. With this lack of recognition, communication through the barrel of a Merkava tank or the trail of a Qassam continues. The denial of a fellow human next door will certainly breed violence, as recognition of his/her needs, and arrangements that meet those needs, can breed calm.

What does this mean practically? Two states still, but with a high degree of labour movement and varied residency status, and a common Israeli-Palestinian political framework on a long list of issues: water, security, Holy Sites, land usage, and the environment, among others.

Whether by war or diplomacy, Palestinians and Israelis will end up with these hybrid arrangements, two states with high permeability under a common equitable framework, which can then even expand to neighbouring states as well.

If this road is not taken, the fruits of the last forty years – denial, violence, settlements, and Hamas – are sure to seed neither peace nor stability, but hells currently unimagined. It is up to Israelis and Palestinians to decide whether they come to that destination, like Europe, only after the scourge of war leaves no other answer, or by other more sensible means.

* John Bell is the Director of the Middle East and Mediterranean Programme at the **Toledo International Centre for Peace**. He previously served as Director of the Jerusalem Office of Search for Common Ground. This article was written for the Common Ground News Service (CGNews).

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