

The Distant Prospect of a Palestinian State

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A Palestinian demonstrator waves a flag during confrontations with Israeli troops Jan. 6, 2023, in the West Bank village of Kfar Qaddum, near the Jewish settlement of Kedumim. (JAAFAR ASHTIYEH/AFP via Getty Images)

Recent media reports suggest that international efforts to establish a Palestinian state are gaining steam. In an op-ed in *The New York Times*, writer Thomas Friedman suggested that the Biden administration is centering a Palestinian state as part of its regional strategy to de-escalate tensions following the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel. He isn't the only one. EU foreign policy Chief Josep Borrell has also suggested that a Palestinian state might need to be imposed, even over Israeli objections. Strategic thinkers and politicians recurrently come to the conclusion that only resolving the core drivers of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will prevent another Hamas-style assault on Israel and the future risk of regional war.

Despite this growing international consensus, there is still a great deal of speculation about what a future Palestinian state might look like. And proposals for a Palestinian state run up against three major hurdles: settlers, security and sovereignty.

First, there is the problem of Israeli settlers in the West Bank, many of whom are now geographically entrenched in locations that make any proposed Palestinian state, even ones that would maximize Palestinian sovereignty, unviable from a security standpoint. For example, the major settlement of Ariel is essentially in the heart of the West Bank and requires a special corridor to maintain connections to Israel, dividing much of the Palestinian territory. Others are situated in and around East Jerusalem, which Palestinians continue to claim as their future capital in any two-state solution. These settlements surround East Jerusalem and make it an unviable position for a capital city. And these settlers have increasing political sway within Israel's Knesset as Israel's demographics shift to the right.

It has long been presumed that some of these settlements would be evacuated, like Israeli settlements were from Gaza in 2005, while others would be traded to Israel for land currently held by Israel in so-called land swaps. But Israelis have soured on the idea of evacuating established settlements, in large part because the Gaza withdrawal experience resulted in the region's takeover by Hamas and the war now being fought. Israeli settlers have also shown their willingness to carry out acts of civil disobedience to stay in their settlements, requiring the Israel Defense Forces to carry out forced removals — a public relations nightmare for any government ordering them. For these reasons, even under current proposals being floated by the United States that would see a demilitarized Palestine emerge alongside Israel, there is still no clear solution to the settlement question.

And the settler question is comparatively simple compared to Israel's enhanced security demands after the Oct. 7 assault. Israeli society has hardened into a more hawkish entity in the wake of the Hamas assault, and at least for now is in no mood to engage in land-for-peace proposals that might allow militants like Hamas to take power as its neighbors again.

As a result, Israel is demanding its military enjoy freedom of operation within the Gaza Strip and the West Bank for the long term to ensure that the IDF can disrupt the emergence of such militant groups. But to some, this is simply occupation by another name. Moreover, Israel is also demanding that a future Palestine remain largely demilitarized, with local police forces but no standing army. Would a Palestine unable to defend its borders or prevent foreign armies from crossing its territory really represent a viable state? While there are modern examples of states without standing armies, this is typically because friendly neighbors guarantee their security. At least in the near term, it would be hard to argue that Israel would be considered a friendly neighbor to a newly independent Palestine.

Finally, there is the matter of Palestinian sovereignty becoming a threat to Israel in its own right. Israel is already demanding extraterritorial security rights in a future Palestine. But what happens if Palestine becomes a functional democracy and its electoral victors are hostile to Israel, as happened after the last Palestinian elections in 2006, when Hamas won a majority in the Palestinian legislature? In these circumstances, would Israel enjoy the right to overturn the elections? For that matter, what if Palestine began to establish deeper economic relations with an Israeli rival like Iran or hosted Iranian politicians for state visits? What if a country like Iran decided to establish observation posts in Palestine to keep an eye on its rival in Israel? It would be very hard to imagine that Israel would stand by and allow Iranian economic and political influence to increase in Palestine, even if such influence did not directly accompany a military relationship.

A number of proposals to address these issues are being floated; in some cases, they have been floated for decades. Some of the international consensus seems to be coalescing around the idea of Palestine as an autonomous zone rather than a sovereign state, in which the final status of settlers will be kicked down the road, the IDF will serve as the security guarantor for Palestine, and Palestinians will only have limited political and foreign policy rights — and certainly, no elected officials to send to the Knesset. But this will seem to some like occupation by another name. It certainly doesn't seem like a formula that will prevent the further radicalization of the Palestinian population such that groups like

Hamas can't carry out long-term campaigns against Israel. And so while seeming the most likely outcome, it also appears to guarantee future violence.

Still, the autonomous zone proposal might gain some traction if it improves Palestinians' standard of living consistently and for many years to come. If Palestinians in an autonomous zone were given the right to travel, work, start a business and trade abroad, and this were to produce a better quality of life in the West Bank and Gaza, key drivers of radicalization would start to decline, even as nationalists would continue to agitate against Israeli control over Palestinian affairs. In this case, an autonomous zone would see the Palestinian resistance movement shift from direct confrontation and violence and toward diplomatic pressure and political resistance against Israeli control. But this is a best-case scenario assumption and relies on the belief that militants like Hamas would not intentionally attempt to sabotage any increase in the standard of living to prevent such a trend from taking hold.

For an autonomous zone to prosper, it would also need a viable Israeli partner that has arrested the growth of its own far right. This is a tricky proposition, as it requires Israeli voters to change their behavior at the polls. This may yet happen in reaction to a stronger Western pressure campaign against the far right, which is already beginning under U.S. President Joe Biden with sanctions on settlers in the West Bank. But such pressure campaigns can also produce a backlash. As the West tries to influence Israeli behavior to moderate, a knee-jerk nationalist reaction may in fact strengthen the very forces that the West is targeting. Rather than making pariahs of the settler movement, such a pressure campaign may make them national martyrs.

As a result, the path even to a Palestinian autonomous zone still seems to be long. Many things would need to fall into place for such a formula to work, but only a handful of things need to go wrong for its failure. Even as ambitions grow in the international community to resurrect the prospect of a Palestinian state, untangling these constraints to its development will require considerable time. A Palestinian state, in other words, is nothing that will appear in the near term.

And if that is the case, it guarantees a resurgence of violence, even as Israel establishes a new security paradigm in Gaza. Hamas will be suppressed, not defeated, and so it will take advantage of the lack of a political solution for Palestinians to rearm and reorganize. Meanwhile, other militant groups will try to compete with Hamas by carrying out attacks on Israel. The cycle of violence will continue, reframed by an extended Israeli occupation of Gaza. While violence will no longer include rockets and missiles from the Gaza Strip, it might include rockets and missiles from Lebanon and Syria and bombs and bullets from the West Bank. And if the Israel-Hamas War ends without political improvements for the Palestinians, it may yet radicalize elements of the Palestinian political spectrum — like Fatah, which now governs the West Bank with Israeli aid — to abandon cooperation with Israel and push it toward a more militant line.