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Israel-Palestine issue: Alternatives beyond two-state solution



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In the turbulent landscape of the Middle East, tensions flared up on October 7, when the Hamas resistance group attacked southern Israel, killing 1,200 people. The attack was a result of decades of pent-up anger of the oppressed Palestinians. The Hamas attack and Israel's violent response reignited a bloody conflict in the Middle East that has been going on for decades.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict traces its origins to the mid-20th century, reaching a turning point with Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories following the Six-Day War in 1967. In 1917, the British government issued the Balfour Declaration, supporting the establishment of a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine. This declaration laid the groundwork for a series of events that have shaped the conflict, including the establishment of Israel in 1948 and the mass displacement of Palestinians, known as the "Nakba," or "catastrophe". This occupation also led to the establishment of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which have significantly contributed to the suffering of the Palestinian population.

The Oct. 7 attack ignited this crisis that has been marked by periods of violence and shifting land boundaries, but rarely prolonged periods of peace. The decades-long crisis has entangled regional states and global powers, raising complex questions surrounding the rights of self-determination.

Two-state solution

Meantime, as a means to address this conflict, international actors and negotiators suggested a two-state solution. The outlines of the two-state process were the result of negotiations between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), mediated by Norway in 1993. In these talks, Israel and the Palestinians, led by Yasser Arafat of the Fatah organization,

pledged to recognize each other formally. The two-state solution that would divide the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean to carve out two independent, sovereign Israeli and Palestinian states existing side by side – has repeatedly been endorsed by world leaders. However, the Oslo process never reached its logical conclusion and even left behind more challenging issues.

Issue of land

The issue of land is at the core of the conflict. For a long time, the efforts aimed at achieving a settlement to the conflict were based on the principle of "land for peace," meaning that if Israel withdraws from the occupied Arab territories, including the occupied Palestinian land, the Arabs will make peace with Israel. The agreement led to the establishment of Palestinian self-governing entities in areas that Israel had occupied during the 1967 war. However, military occupation and the construction of Jewish settlements persisted, leaving the final status issues to future negotiations.

Israel has also been keen to pursue more peace deals with Arab states without giving up land, having won normalization from the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, and upgraded ties with Morocco and Sudan, in 2020 despite talks with the Palestinians having been frozen for years.

In general, it has proved impossible for Israel and the Palestinians to reach an agreement. And, since talks brokered by John Kerry, the then US secretary of state, collapsed in 2014, and as Jewish settlements continue to expand in the West Bank and East Al-Quds, the consensus has been that the two-state solution is dead.

Obstacles: Israel itself

Why hasn't this suggestion been realized yet? The main obstacle to this solution at the first step has been Israel itself. Most international supporters of the two-state solution favor returning Israel to the borders that it had before territory annexations after the 1967 war. But Israel opposes relinquishing the lands it occupied and returning to the borders before 1967. The term "occupied territories," and Israel's obligation to withdraw from them, was first used in UN Resolution 242 after the 1967 war. It refers to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. While Israel calls these "disputed territories," its policies have indisputably led to dispossession, settler violence, creeping annexation, and charges of apartheid in the

West Bank

The challenges, however, are significant. Palestinians and Israelis currently live within the borders of what could become the other's potential future state. Many Palestinian families seek to return to areas lost during the 1948 war.

President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas, who governs Palestinian-controlled areas of the West Bank, has accused Israel of "systematically destroying the two-state solution."

"Whoever thinks that peace can prevail in the Middle East without the Palestinian people enjoying their full and legitimate national rights is delusional," Abbas said at the UN General Assembly in September, before the current war began. Abbas, who is supported by the West, has been in office since 2005 but remains unpopular among many Palestinians.

Hamas

Just as the PLO turned to pragmatism, however, a new organization, Hamas, rejected the Oslo Accords.

However, the Palestinian resistance group that controls the Gaza Strip said in 2017 that it was prepared to accept a Palestinian state along the 1967 borders. However, its then-leader, Khaled Meshal, said the group would not recognize Israel or cede any rights.

Netanyahu

At present, Israel's far-right cabinet is viscerally opposed to the very idea of an independent Palestinian state, and its leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, has blocked progress on the issue for many years. Few expect him to survive as prime minister once the war is over, but there is no obvious pro-peace alternative in waiting.

In and out of office, Netanyahu has worked consistently hard to thwart Palestinian independence. It is safe to say he is not about to change his mind. If the two-state solution can be revived, it won't happen while he is prime minister.

Netanyahu said during a 2015 re-election campaign that there would be no indepen-

dent Palestinian state as long as he holds office. However, since then, he has appeared more receptive to the idea, but with major caveats on security. He told CNN earlier this year: "I'm certainly willing to have them have all the powers that they need to govern themselves, but none of the powers that can threaten us."

This underscores Israel's concerns about the future leadership of the official state of Palestine.

Illegal settlements

A two-state solution is no longer possible, said Mark LeVine, a history professor at the University of California at Irvine.

"Just look at the map," said the chair of the program in global Middle East studies at the university, referring to the hundreds of Israeli settlements across the West Bank.

In 1993, when the first Oslo agreement was signed, these settlers numbered around 130,000. Today, according to the UN, there are almost 700,000.

Before the October 7 war, Israel's expansion of settlements in the West Bank posed a significant barrier to peace for Palestinians. With a surge in settler violence, West Bank Palestinians now face heightened concerns about potential new displacements. Many in the international community consider these settlements illegal under international law, a view disputed by the regime. The expansion of settlements further complicates the prospects for a two-state solution.

Achcar, the SOAS professor, said that the Oslo Accords contained no provision to stop settlement building, which has exploded in the intervening decades. "To have the Palestinians accept something like a two-state solution, you would need a full withdrawal of the settlements," he said. Yossi Meikelberg, an associate fellow at the London-based think tank Chatham House, noted that the Israeli withdrawal of just 8,000 settlers from Gaza in 2005 "tore apart Israeli society." Many Israelis see the Gaza pullout as a big mistake.

As prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin had put a freeze on new Israeli settlements in the