

## "What Kind of Two-State Solution?"

Now that President Obama has put his weight so openly and publicly behind the concept of a two-state "solution" for the Israel-Palestine controversy/struggle, such a "solution" may well be achieved in the coming years. The reason is simple. Stated abstractly, such a solution has overwhelming support in world political opinion. Polls show a majority of Jewish Israelis favor it, as do a majority of Jews elsewhere in the world. Support among Arab leaders is strong and wide. Even Hamas indicates it is willing to accept the concept of two states on the basis of an indefinite "truce" in the struggle. Some "truces" in the modern world have lasted four centuries. And more recently, there has been "truces" on the Korean peninsula and in Kashmir for more than a half-century. Some "truces" seem pretty permanent.

What seems to be left out of the discussion these days is what does the expression "two states" mean? Quite diverse definitions exist. We should remember that the last real negotiations, those between Yasir Arafat and Ehud Barak in 2000, foundered at the last minute at Taba over diverse definitions.

What are the issues in these contrary definitions? There are at least six different issues which the mere slogan of "two states" hides. The first issue is the definition of sovereignty. The Palestinians of course think that sovereign means sovereign - a state with the same powers as any other sovereign state. Even those Israeli political leaders who have accepted the terminology of two states have been thinking of a limited version of sovereignty. For example, what kind of military apparatus would such the Palestinian state have? Would it control completely overflight permissions? Would it have unlimited control of its borders?

The second issue is of course the borders of such a state. Both the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Hamas feel that accepting the 1967 borders is already an enormous concession on their part. They certainly do not expect to obtain anything less. But such borders of course do not include the post-1967 Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories, nor east Jerusalem. Tiny adjustments in these borders might be acceptable. But tiny means truly tiny.

The third issue is internal democracy in Israel. Will non-Jewish Israelis continue to have fewer rights than Jewish Israelis? This is a central and very little discussed question.

The fourth issue is whether the two states will be defined as secular states or religious states. Will the Palestinian state be a Muslim state? Will Israel continue to be a Jewish state?

The fifth issue is the so-called right of return. Israel was founded on the unlimited right of return of any Jew who wishes to come to Israel. The Arabs who fled from Israel (or were forced out) demand a right of return. This has been the knottiest issue in the entire historic debate. It is a question of both demography and land. The Palestinians might accept a merely symbolic gesture on this question, if all other issues were resolved in ways they considered appropriate.

Finally, of course, there is the question of what would happen with the existing Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories. It is conceivable that the Palestinians might say that some of them could remain where they are. But it seems hardly likely that the settlers would agree to stay in a Palestinian state, or would willingly accept evacuation to Israel.

Now what has Obama done? He has taken a strong position on two questions the present ultra-right Israeli government refuses to accept: no further expansion of any kind of the existing settlements and a commitment to a two-state solution. This is unquestionably positive and courageous in the context of U.S. internal politics.

However, it risks being dangerous in terms of any real solution. For consider the following possibility. Under severe twisting of the arm of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu by Obama, Netanyahu concedes both points, and reshuffles his cabinet in the light of this shift in position. Will he then not turn around and say to Obama that now the Palestinians must make comparable concessions? But he would not really be talking about "controlling violence" by the Palestinian Authority - the usual Israeli governmental mantra. He will mean concessions on all the issues I have listed above - on none of which any Palestinian leadership can today make any significant further concession.

Obama's courageous gestures will then turn out to be a mode of distraction from the real underlying issues.

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