

Reconciling Israeli and US Plans for “The Day After” in Gaza

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TEL AVIV—The United States and Israel have advanced apparently conflicting visions of the day after Israel defeats Hamas in Gaza. Whereas the Biden administration seeks the establishment of a Palestinian state, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government plans on retaining overall security responsibility for Gaza and installing local Palestinian officials untainted by ties to terrorist organizations to administer civil affairs.

The neglected common ground between Israel and the United States offers an opportunity to make the terrible situation in Gaza less terrible.

On Oct. 6, 2023, no one was talking about a two-state solution. Israel was mired in a social and political crisis triggered by the Netanyahu government’s January 2023 proposal for a major overhaul of the Israeli judiciary. The Abraham Accords were facilitating growing security cooperation, commercial relations, and cultural exchange between the original parties – Israel, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates. In the face of

the Iranian threat, the Biden administration was making progress toward a comprehensive deal with Saudi Arabia that would include normalization of relations with Israel if Jerusalem took steps to advance Palestinian independence. And Hamas, it was widely thought – in accordance with Netanyahu’s stated policy of providing financial support for the terrorist organization – was content to sporadically fire rockets at Israel while gradually giving more attention to improving Gazans’ economic well-being.

Yet in late October 2023, just a few weeks after Hamas’ barbaric Oct. 7 assault on Israel – the jihadists slaughtered around 1200 mostly civilians, raped women, mutilated bodies, and kidnapped approximately 240, mostly civilians – President Joe Biden affirmed that the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict required the creation of a Palestinian state. That during periods of relative calm Presidents Clinton, Bush, Obama, and Trump failed to midwife the birth of a Palestinian state did not seem to disturb Biden administration calculations.

The administration’s push for a Palestinian state also appeared to disregard Israel’s domestic politics. Despite the remarkable rallying of civil society in Israel to defend the nation, the Jewish state remained deeply divided. The trauma inflicted by the Oct. 7 atrocities ran deep within Israelis, who were already reeling from the bruising battles over judicial reform, which had followed five destabilizing elections in three and a half years. And the country was engaged in a multi-front war with Iran-backed militias that included preparations for a full-scale ground campaign in Gaza, regarded by many Israelis as essential to the Jewish state’s survival. In those tense circumstances, and with the Palestinian Authority widely seen as corrupt and sclerotic, few Israelis were prepared to entertain yet another round of talks about a two-state solution.

Nevertheless, in a mid-December visit to the region while the Gaza war was raging, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan pressed for a Palestinian Authority-led Palestinian state. Before meeting in Ramallah with PA President Mahmoud Abbas, Sullivan said discussions would deal with efforts to “revamp and revitalize the Palestinian Authority.” At the meeting, Sullivan “reemphasized President Biden’s longstanding vision for a more peaceful, integrated, and prosperous Middle East region, and ultimately a path to a two-state solution that provides for equal measures of justice, freedom, and dignity for Israelis and Palestinians alike.”

It has been insufficiently observed that Sullivan left open the criteria that would guide the PA’s revamping and revitalizing while highlighting “a path to a two-state solution” rather than the solution itself.

In late January 2024, New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman reported that the administration’s ideas about the Middle East had crystalized into “a Biden doctrine.” One track involved a tougher stance toward Iran. Another focused on tighter security cooperation with Saudi Arabia. A third called for “an unprecedented U.S. diplomatic initiative to promote a Palestinian state – NOW,” wrote Friedman. It was easy to overlook that Friedman’s “NOW” referred not to the achievement of a Palestinian state but to its promotion.

Friedman identified demanding conditions that a Palestinian state must meet. The Biden doctrine’s implementation, he argued, “would involve some form of U.S. recognition of a demilitarized Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip that would come into being only once Palestinians had developed a set of

defined, credible institutions and security capabilities to ensure that this state was viable and that it could never threaten Israel.”

In mid-February, Martin Indyk, who played a leading role in the unsuccessful efforts of Presidents Clinton and Obama to create a Palestinian state, echoed Sullivan’s and Friedman’s language. In “The Strange Resurrection of the Two-State Solution,” published online at Foreign Affairs in late February, he argued that a Palestinian state is urgently needed. “There is no credible way to bring the war in Gaza to an end without trying to fashion a new, more stable order there,” Indyk wrote. “But that cannot be done without also establishing a credible path to a two-state solution.” Like Sullivan and Friedman, Indyk identified the ultimate destination but stressed the need to devise a plausible route.

Indyk observed, moreover, that several principal players in rebuilding Gaza are focused less on consummating the enterprise than on launching it properly while keeping in mind the overall target. “The Sunni Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, are insisting on that as a condition for their support for the revitalization of the PA and the reconstruction of Gaza, as is the rest of the international community,” he wrote. “The PA would need to be able to point to that goal in order to legitimize any role it played in controlling Gaza. And the Biden administration must be able to include the goal of two states as part of the Israeli-Saudi agreement it is still eager to broker.”

One principal player, however, seems to have opted out of pursuit of a two-state solution. In late February, Prime Minister Netanyahu presented Israel’s war cabinet with his long-awaited plan for the day after Israel’s defeat of Hamas. In a one-page document, he enumerated principles to guide Israeli policy in Gaza for the short run, the intermediate run, and the long run. A Palestinian state was mentioned – in line with much of Israeli public opinion – only to reject its unilateral recognition.

In the short run, according to Netanyahu’s statement of principles, Israel must destroy the jihadists’ ability to govern and wage war, secure the hostages’ return, and establish long-term protection against future threats from Gaza.

In the intermediate run, the document calls on Israel to address security imperatives and civilian administration. Israel must demilitarize Gaza; operate militarily throughout the territory; establish a security zone within Gaza on the Israel border; guard Gaza’s border with Egypt while cooperating with Cairo and Washington to prevent smuggling into Gaza from the Sinai Peninsula; and exercise security control over the entire territory west of the Jordan River, which includes not only Gaza but also Judea and Samaria – home to West Bank Palestinians. Israel must also to the extent possible transfer administrative power to local Palestinians who have not trafficked in terrorism; deradicalize – in cooperation with Arab states – Gaza’s religious, educational, and welfare institutions; close and replace UNRWA, the UN organization whose workers were involved in the Oct. 7 attacks and whose schools teach jihadism; and, following demilitarization and the commencement of deradicalization, help rebuild Gaza with the financial and administrative aid of Israel’s friends and partners.

In the long run, a final-status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, “will only be achieved through direct negotiations between the sides without preexisting conditions.” Furthermore, “Israel will continue to oppose unilateral recognition of a Palestinian state,” the Netanyahu document states. “Such recognition following the Oct. 7 slaughter would grant a great prize without precedent to terror and would thwart any future peace arrangements.”

Writing in Tablet in early February, Elliott Abrams – deputy national security adviser with responsibility for the Middle East for President George W. Bush – supplied additional reasons why, in the aftermath of the Oct. 7 attacks, Israelis generally reject the establishment of a Palestinian state. In “The Two-State Delusion,” he argued that proponents – true of Sullivan, Friedman, and Indyk – give little reason to believe that Israel and the Palestinian Authority are better situated today to resolve the vexing issues that have derailed decades of assiduous U.S. attempts to reach a final status agreement: the drawing of borders, the status of Jerusalem, and the plight of Palestinian refugees. In addition, warns Abrams, a Palestinian state in current circumstances is, to put matters gently, unlikely to respect individual freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. And it would provide Iran, the world’s leading state sponsor of terror, a comfortable outpost on Israel’s doorstep.

Nevertheless, even Netanyahu’s statement of principles opposed not a Palestinian state but its “unilateral recognition.” And not forever but as a reward for Hamas’ mass atrocities. At the same time, Abrams’ analysis sets forth practical criteria for Israel’s recognition of a demilitarized Palestinian state at some point down the road: negotiated agreement on borders, Jerusalem, and refugees, coupled with viable political institutions and arrangements that provide for Israel’s national security interests.

Building on the common ground between the Biden administration, Israel, and the Saudis and other Arab partners depends, then, on distinguishing between the long-term goal and salutary short- and intermediate-term undertakings. With the benefit of deft diplomacy and rhetorical fine-tuning, the parties can agree on the ambitious long-term goal – perhaps very long term – of a demilitarized Palestinian state while jointly pursuing short-term measures to defeat Hamas, provide humanitarian relief, deradicalize Gaza, and install suitable civil administrators. Such vital short-term measures are indispensable prerequisites for the establishment of a Palestinian state in the long term.

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