Politics Q2. Is peace in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip possible?

Introduction

Since the Jewish people migrated to the Middle East and settled down in the twentieth century, the conflict between Israel and Palestine has long been one of the deepest controversies that disturb the peace of the world. Over the decades, both sides and the whole world have made repeated efforts to find a path to peace in the Palestine region. Policymakers and scholars alike vehemently debate "two state," "one state," or "no state" solutions.[i] However, due to all kinds of obstacles, none of the efforts had achieved the fundamental goal of peaceful coexistence. At present, a new round of military conflict between Israel and Hamas is taking place in the Gaza Strip, and the hope of peace seems far as usual. However, this essay argues that peace in the West Bank and Gaza Strip remains possible. It starts by identifying key factors that obstructed the success of past peace negotiations. Then, it suggests three possible perspectives to solving these challenges: constructing faith among negotiating parties, strengthening domestic support for peace, and countering the threat of terrorism.

Dissecting past failures

To find out the prospects of peace, we have to first examine the reasons for which past attempts failed. In 1993, the pathbreaking Oslo Accord was signed at the White House by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) chairman Yasser Arafat. It established mutual recognition between Israel and Palestine and committed to a five-year timeline to achieve a permanent settlement based on UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.[ii] In 1995, the Oslo II agreement provided for Palestinian self-rule in parts of the West Bank and also set the framework for Palestinian elections.[iii] But the high hopes from Oslo did not last long. The peace prospects quickly evaporated in the coming years as the clock ticked and violence abounded. From the timeline of the peace process, we can conclude several main factors of its failure.

In the first place, the leaders of Israel and Palestine often fail to reach an agreement on key issues. The Oslo Accord, despite its remarkable promise, was only an interim agreement that left the most pressing issues—permanent borders, Jewish settlements, Palestinian refugees, and the division of Jerusalem—to be addressed later. In 2000, Bill Clinton's renewed peace effort at Camp David attempted to strike at these tough issues, but the Palestinians found Israel's final offer for 92 per cent of the West Bank territory unsatisfactory, the Israelis were unable to meet the Palestinian demand for Israel's full acknowledgement and remedy for the 1948 *Nakba*, and the contested sovereignty over

Jerusalem remained intractable.[iv] The peace summit ultimately failed.

Another interrupting element is the domestic opposition in both countries. In former peace processes, many Israelis viewed the withdrawal from the occupied territories as concession, while many Palestinians also disliked the idea of negotiating with their enemy. Thus, Israeli prime ministers often faced domestic discontent and lost public support in the process of negotiation. They couldn't stay in office long enough to finish the peace process, while their successors had new policies and campaigns, adding uncertainty to the whole process. In 1995, Rabin was assassinated by a Jewish extremist because of his "concession" to the Palestinians.[v] The prime ministers succeeding Rabin, such as Shimon Peres, Benjamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak, all stayed in office for only one term or even less, and then quickly lost their popularity among the voters.[vi] In the meantime, the Islamists in Palestine, represented by Hamas, also opposed the agreements because they refuse any kind of compromise. In Palestine, support for Hamas grew stronger and stronger as the peace process dragged on. In 2006, Hamas achieved a dramatic victory in the parliamentary election, winning 42.9 per cent of the vote and 74 out of the 132 seats.[vii] Fatah, while still controlling the presidency, only received 45 seats in the parliament.[viii] No parliamentary elections had been held since, and the power struggle between Fatah and Hamas carried on.

Last, and one of the most fatal factors that threatens the brittle peace between Israel and Palestine, is terrorism. Today, Israel has achieved relative peace with surrounding nations and developed the most powerful military forces in the Middle East. Its greatest security concern is the constant threat from Hamas, or a possible Palestinian State controlled by extremists which has the ability to launch frequent attacks onto Israeli homeland.[ix] After the signing of the Oslo Accords, many suicidal attacks have taken place in Israel and caused large numbers of casualties. Over the decades, one of Israel's top priorities is to ensure the safety of its citizens, but Hamas has repeatedly sabotaged this goal by resorting to terrorism to express its dissatisfaction. Every attack has deepened the hatred between Israel and Palestine and undermined the search for peace.[x]

These factors reflect the serious obstacles on the way to peace, but they are not insurmountable. If Israel and Palestine can find ways to overcome these challenges and reshape conditions on the ground, the possibility of peace remains alive. The following paragraphs propose several specific solutions to these problems.

Building trust to facilitate negotiations

The first obstacle is that Israel and Palestine often fail to reach an agreement in peace negotiations because they lack trust, mutual understanding, and historical acknowledgement. Both sides can change the situation by taking actions such as

historical narrative revision, official apology, and public commemorations. [xi] For example, Israel can officially recognize and apologize for the tremendous Palestinian suffering in the *Nakba* of 1948, and Palestine can publicly mourn for Israeli victims in past terrorist attacks. By showing an attitude of introspecting the past, these actions can signal recognition for the common humanity and human rights of both peoples, as well as willingness to remedy historical harms. Although some hardliners may consider these actions as a sign of weakness, they are more palatable to political leaders than tangible concessions on territory or sovereignty.

Another factor that can promote the negotiation between Israel and Palestine is non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Due to their greater flexibility and neutral position, NGOs can help facilitate dialogue and discussion independent of formal negotiations.[xii] They can also appeal effectively to an international audience that can in turn influence actors in the Middle East. For instance, the Geneva Initiative, an NGO consisting of both Israelis and Palestinians, secretly carried out informal peace negotiations for over two years and published a final agreement in 2003.[xiii] In addition to reiterating past consensus, it also suggested new solutions such as setting Jerusalem as the capital for both states and security arrangements for the Palestinian state.[xiv] This unofficial agreement was very popular among Israeli and Palestinian citizens and generated a large impact by inspiring new conversations. Many public figures, such as professors and former government officials from both Israel and Palestine, expressed their strong support. The initiative also received support from many global leaders including Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the former foreign minister of Germany, and Michel Rocard, the former prime minister of France.[xv] As shown by the case of the Geneva Initiative, NGO efforts can attract a lot of attention worldwide and greatly promote the mutual understanding of Israel and Palestine.

Transforming domestic attitude

The second problem of any peace process is the domestic opposition in both Israel and Palestine against reconciliation because of historical animosity. Since political leaders had to consider the opinion of their people, this greatly slowed down the whole peace process. However, educational reforms and people-to-people contact can play a key role in ameliorating historical hatred and preparing the domestic populations for peace.

Education is the decisive factor that builds the value and character of the young generation in any country. The UNESCO is already using education as a tool to address and counter hate around the world,[xvi] and in the US, education is a significant component in the fight against racism. Through educational interventions that

deconstruct bias and prejudice, the new generation's values are being changed, and their opinions about the colored are also being reshaped.[xvii] Therefore, reforming the education system in Israel and Palestine and teaching the children to understand and respect their neighbor's right to exist are the first and the most vital step to changing Israeli and Palestinian views of each other. Once the education system stops the selective use of facts[xviii] and begins adopting more objective historical accounts, the children will be able to review their past more comprehensively. Equipped with an understanding of the conflict with less bias and more compassion, the next generation can develop their own thoughts about the relationship between Israel and Palestine. When they grow up, they will eventually reshape the situation in the region.

Another method that could help to reduce hostility is to increase the contact between Israelis and Palestinians. In the 1980s, the Coexistence Model was introduced, and it remained the dominant model of planned contact interventions between Israelis and Palestinians.[xix] It seeks to promote mutual understanding and tolerance between Jews and Arabs, reduce stereotypes, foster positive intergroup attitudes, and advance other goals by joining the two communities together.[xx] The logic is simple: more interaction means better understanding, and even friendship. Once more and more Israelis and Palestinians could understand and even become friends with each other, the hostility between Israel and Palestine will spontaneously abate. Although progress may take time, public and private actors can start by organizing joint activities that expose Israelis and Palestinians to each other in collegial settings. As familiarity grows, the governments can proceed to building cohabitation areas where Arabs and Jews live in integrated neighborhoods instead of segregated zones. Viewing each other as neighbors rather than enemies, the peoples of Israel and Palestine will become more likely to embrace peace.

Counterterrorism and deradicalization

The greatest factor that threatens the advancement of the peace process is terrorism. One effective way to suppress these attacks is to set up buffer zones along the borders.[xxi] With uninhabited zones equipped with quick reaction forces, the difficulty for Hamas to infiltrate Israel and carry out attacks will be significantly increased. Terrorists will no longer be able to carry a bomb across the border easily, and the existing underground tunnels used by Hamas can be more readily detected.[xxii]

At the same time, the Palestine Authority and civil society groups should make use of their normative power to call on their people to be more rational and reduce the public support for Hamas. This will not only weaken the influence of terrorism, but also reduce the opposition to negotiations and peace talks, because Hamas is the biggest

political force against the peace process. Ultimately, the advancement of the peace process can potentially deradicalize Hamas. In other conflict-ridden countries such as South Africa, Colombia, and Burundi, critical opposition forces were incentivized to join the negotiating table when the peace process appeared to bear fruit, because participation afforded them more influence than staying outside as a spoiler.[xxiii] Similarly, Hamas's position is capable of evolvement, especially when accompanied by a shift of attitude in the broader Palestinian society towards peaceful solutions.

Conclusion

Though the conflict between Israel and Palestine has a history of more than a century, peace is not a fantasy. As the region receives more and more attention worldwide, past experiences have indicated a clear way to peace. As long as Israel and Palestine gradually take actions to build up trust and mutual understanding, reduce the emotion of hate among their citizens, and fight against extremists and terrorists from now on, peaceful coexistence will eventually become reality, and the region will develop in a more harmonious way.

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