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Has Livni buried the two-state solution of Israel-Palestinian dispute?

DEBKAFfile Exclusive Analysis

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Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni

Foreign minister and aspiring prime minister Tzipi Livni used an apparent paradox to bury the two-state solution. In a speech she gave to high school pupils Thursday, Dec. 11, she said: "The place for Israeli Arabs to exercise their national aspirations is a future Palestinian state - not Israel, which is the Jewish national home." Livni's next comment: "No single Palestinian refugee will be admitted to Israel" was a roundabout message in the same vein to the Israeli Arab minority (a steady one-fifth of the population).

She clarified this later by saying that while Israeli Arabs would not be forced to leave or lose their civil rights, "those who wished to realize their national aspirations should look elsewhere," namely to a Palestinian state when it rises.

But what Palestine was she talking about? For now and in the foreseeable future, there are two – one ruled by Hamas in Gaza and one by Fatah on the West Bank, as the foreign minister knows very well.

America and European leaders will no doubt do their utmost to breathe life into the two-state solution. It was first enunciated by President George W. Bush and is the only raison d'etre of the Middle East Quartet, which convenes next week at UN headquarters. In Bahrain Saturday, Dec. 13, US defense secretary Robert Gates promised the incoming administration would continue to back a two-state solution of the Middle East dispute.

But they are all in for a head-on clash with reality.

As long as Israel is not prepared to use its army to recapture the Gaza Strip, crush the Hamas government and make Mahmoud Abbas a gift of the enclave, only three eventualities are in store:

1. Either the Hamas entity extends its rule to the West Bank and ousts the Abbas administration, a recipe for war rather than diplomacy; or
2. The two Palestines endure as separate, unstable entities – Hamas-ruled Gaza sustained by Iran and the West Bank governed by Fatah, propped up by US-trained Palestinian security forces and the Israeli military presence; or
3. While Israeli sustains its blockade of the Gaza Strip from the north and east, Egypt will lift its closure in the south and so pave the way for its gradual domination of the territory.

The geographic duality of Palestinian rule is only one complicating factor.

Another was offered Saturday by former Palestinian prime minister, Ahmed Qureia (Abu Ala).

He, like the Israeli side, confirmed that the negotiations which he and Mahmoud Abbas conducted with Ehud Olmert and latterly Livni for two years were hopelessly stuck in the mud. He then administered the last rites to the ideal of an Israeli and Palestinian states co-existing side by side

Their US sponsor's had assumed that had been the object and guiding principle of those talks.

Not so, according to Abu Ala.

He outlined Israel's proposal: The handover of 93.2 percent of the West Bank to the Palestinians while retaining the Jerusalem sector up to Ramallah (Givat Zeev and part of the Gush Binyamin), Maaleh Adummim, Gush Etzion and the Jordan Valley. Israel offered to trade the 6.8 percent remaining in its hands for a comparable stretch of the Negev. Jerusalem was not discussed.

The Palestinians rejected this proposal out of hand.

Abu Ala's frankness was motivated less by Israel's election campaign, in which Livni is running a close race against the right-of-center Likud party headed by Binyamin Netanyahu, than his wish to put president elect-Barak Obama and designated secretary of state Hillary Clinton in the real picture as seen by the moderate Palestinians which he represents.

He was advising them to give up the Middle East peace principles guiding the outgoing administration in the last two years, because the Palestinians had no intention of going through with the Bush administration's initiative.

Abu Ala did not try to haggle over the size of Israel's withdrawal from the West Bank, because that is not the point.

The Palestinians negate the basic premise of a Palestinian state within the pre-1967 Six-day War borders - the conventional wisdom of US and European diplomacy though not enshrined in any maps or international accords.

The Palestinians are demanding nothing less than Israel's retreat to the 1949 armistice lines and in some places the UN 1947 Partition Plan plus the Right of Return for all Palestinian refugees.

The two-state formula – now confirmed by Gates - cannot bridge this gap and is therefore unrealistic as a starting point for Middle East peace diplomacy.

(Res.) Brig. Giora Eiland, head of Israel's national security council under former prime minister Ariel Sharon, put the dilemma in a nutshell in a lecture to the diplomatic corps in Jerusalem on Nov. 17:

"When we talk about a two-state solution, we face a paradox: On the one hand, Israelis and Palestinians feel a genuine need to resolve their dispute. On the other, neither has any real interest – or belief - in the establishment of two states living side by side. This dichotomy is far deeper than generally appreciated and is getting deeper all the time."

Eiland pointed out that the career risks any Israeli or Palestinian politician runs by embracing this formula would far outweigh his chances of success. Neither side is therefore willing to gamble his personal future against such odds.

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