



Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

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In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that define U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Michelle Nhuch (NHUCH@MIT.EDU, 617.253.1965)

Center for International Studies

Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Building E38-200
292 Main Street
Cambridge, MA 02139

T: 617.253.8093
F: 617.253.9330
cis-info@mit.edu

web.mit.edu/cis/
web.mit.edu/cis/acw.html

Much Ado About Nothing: The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process

Anat Biletzki

Center for International Studies

Two myths have been with us for a while now; one is of lasting permanence, the other has gained traction more recently. The first is that the way to get out of the Israeli-Palestinian imbroglio is by engaging in a “peace process,” and the second is that the result of that peace process is pretty much well-known.

That first, somewhat procedural assumption consists of a series of sub-myths: a peace process takes time, it involves negotiations, it engages “partners,” it mandates compromise, and its aim is Peace with a capital P. This, obviously, connects it to the second presumption—the negotiations that constitute a peace process will be geared toward that consensual solution. As articulated by Bernard Avishai recently, “Everybody knows the parameters of the end-deal. It will have Jerusalem as the capital of both states, it will involve land swaps of equal size for any deviation from the 1967 lines, and it will permit Palestinian refugees to return to the Palestinian state—not to Israel as a Jewish state.”¹ The *New York Review of Books* sported a letter, in preview of the Annapolis conference of November 2007, signed by respected and prestigious names (such as Zbigniew Brzezinski and Thomas R. Pickering) that gave a perhaps more nuanced but just as predictable outline of the solution, including “two states, based on the lines of June 4, 1967, with minor, reciprocal, and agreed-upon modifications as expressed in a 1:1 land swap...Jerusalem as home to two capitals...A solution to the refugee problem that is consistent with the two-state solution.”² And even the more audacious Hussein Agha and Robert Malley reiterated that pre-supposition this spring, though in a realistic bout of skepticism: “a Palestinian state, final and recognized borders, a divided Jerusalem.”³ It would seem that we’ve got it—the picture of peace—all worked out.

Dismantling those two myths always runs the risk of accusation of political bias. Indeed, the second one—the one about a possible, feasible, consensual solution—is, in some quarters, the most deeply contested issue in certain political debates going on in and about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Deeply contesting it, however, are very few people, usually derided as being from a “loony left,” or only looking out for Palestinian interests, or, at best, wasting time on an irrelevant debate.

This myth is, without a doubt, the conventional wisdom. Loosely coined “The Two State Solution,” and broadly accepted, it pretends to address and to finally and literally solve the core

ANAPOLIS of the Conventional Wisdom

Anat Biletski is professor of philosophy at Tel Aviv University and a fellow at the Program on Human Rights and Justice at the Center for International Studies at MIT. She was previously chair of the board of B'Tselem—the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories.

topics that are at issue in the conflict: borders, Jerusalem, and refugees. So an argument with this vision must either attack its practicability (to the tune of “this is not—or no longer—a *realistic* solution”) or its presumed root-comprehensiveness (intoning “this is not—and could never be—a *just* solution”). Whatever the assault, the question is about the content and essence of the end-state, not about how to get there. It is the first mantra, concerning a peace *process*, which deals with that.

The “Peace Process”

One could say that we have been in the midst of some sort of peace process since the 1991 Madrid conference. Erstwhile movers and shakers can, in fact, point to earlier attempts at peace-making—clandestine efforts at give-and-take, less or more secret track-2 initiatives, various collaborations (between teachers, students, doctors, lawyers, et al, from “both sides”)—that have had sporadic success and perhaps even some achievements. But the starting point of a grand-scale peace process, one with official authorities of Israel and Palestine, can be pinpointed in Madrid. Then followed the Oslo 1 and 2 accords, the Wye River Memorandum, the Taba Summit, the Road Map to Peace, and finally the Annapolis Conference.

Each of these housed almost an identical set of ceremonies, rituals, icons, and discourse (and several identical players as well). Almost all had the expected preliminary (honest?) deliberations, the requisite early (prefabricated?) suspense, the accompaniment of (objective?) third-party American pressure, the moments of (manufactured?) crisis, and the final fanfare regarding an (historic?) announcement.

Fifteen years of a peace process—going where? Were its conclusion as obvious as consensus seems to dictate, one might expect some progress toward that conclusion. But perusing the documents of the stations on this road to peace, one finds tiring repetitions. Starting at Madrid the process is outlined as follows: “Negotiations between Israel and Palestinians...will be conducted in phases, beginning with talks on interim self-government... [whose] arrangements will last for a period of five years... negotiations will take place on a permanent basis.” And the invitation to Madrid included the vision that related process to peace: “this process offers the promise of ending decades of confrontation and conflict and the hope of lasting peace...only through such a process can real peace and reconciliation among the Arab states, Israel and the Palestinians be achieved.”

The Oslo accords did, famously, create a Palestinian Authority and did, infamously, divide the Palestinian Territories into separate zones of differing control mechanisms. They, too, spoke of a five-year interim period in which negotiations would attempt to address a permanent agreement on the big issues (borders, Jerusalem, refugees, et al). Oslo 2, while claiming adherence to past efforts and instituting movement “on the ground” regarding transfer of Israeli control to the Palestinian Authority in several towns, was unabashedly interim, even in title (*Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements*) with nary a mention of a final solution. In its wake, both the Hebron Protocol (1997) and the Wye River Memorandum (1998) focused almost exclusively on similar deployments, with framers of the latter not blushing while exclaiming that “permanent status negotiations” would be immediately resumed in accelerated mode.

When such intense negotiations for a “final status settlement” were seriously entertained in Camp David in 2000 and at the Taba Summit in 2001, no agreement was ultimately reached. The Road Map for Peace, which voiced the same general mantra (“a vision of two states, a secure State of Israel and a viable, peaceful, democratic Palestine”) added nothing concerning the details of that vision except to call, once more, for an additional international conference, where the final agreement—again, on Jerusalem, border, and refugees—would be worked out. And now we have Annapolis (more on that shortly).

Surely this cannot be called progress. Are we, perhaps, jaded? Is it that we’ve become weary—both of the heralded accomplishments, which are a diminishing returns list of goals, and of the routine interruptions of the process, usually blamed on the Palestinian turn to violence and terror? Or is there, perchance, another explanation for this standing-in-place while doing-the-dance of negotiations in a peace process?

Facts on the Ground

If peace were the authentic object of the game, the end-point of the peace process, one would have expected to see advances toward peace during this drawn out process, laborious, detailed, and cumbersome though it is. Yet looking at the situation today, it seems rather that peace is farther away than

ever. That perception—of peace being far and unattainable—is the predominant attitude held, again, by both the man on the street and the knowledgeable expert. One of the most pertinent factors in that despair is the “facts on the ground.”⁴

Those facts are amply illustrated by an interesting phenomenon accompanying the interim deals.⁵ Israel is routinely admonished to cease expansion of the settlement project that has landed 500,000 Israeli settlers in the West Bank over the last 40 years. Yet note the following: After Oslo, in the years between 1993 and 2001, the population of the settlements grew from about 247,000 to 375,000—an increase of 50 percent, putting an astounding 47 percent of the area of the West Bank under control of the settlements. In three later years—2005–2007, after the fanfare of the Road Map to Peace—there were over 5,000 residential units constructed for Jews in the West Bank, and the population of the settlements (not including East Jerusalem) grew at a steady annual pace of about 6 percent.

Since the Annapolis agreement, the facts have been troublingly illustrative. Although Israel agreed to a “settlement freeze” at that event, not only has previously started construction of 220 buildings continued, but 275 new construction sites have sprouted, with an additional 185 caravans installed and tenders for construction of 750 housing units in East Jerusalem newly issued. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert can be heard saying that Jerusalem is on the negotiations table and, on that same day, telling the ultra-orthodox party in his coalition, Shas, that Jerusalem is non-negotiable. Usual—conventional—political commentary explains this away, saying that Olmert, needing to follow the parliamentary coalition track, must placate his government. (That same political punditry explains Abbas’s and Bush’s actions in similar terms of political exigency.) I submit that the opposite is the case: Olmert, needing to execute a peace-process dance, must deceive the lookers-on and maintain the consensus that this is a peace process leading to peace. In truth, he is not aiming for the end of the process, but rather engaging in an end-less dance.

Mirage of the End Point

Perhaps the process has become an end-in-itself, whence we must evaluate anew the end-point to which it is leading. First, if indeed the object is to play the game of negotiations while not really negotiating *toward* anything, it is no wonder that the fruits of negotiations are negligible, fruits that are only internal to the process. That is to say, the peace process has to invigorate itself and ensure its own intensity and continuation. So we see, especially now in the wake of Annapolis, an astounding amount of movement: Bush in Israel, once, maybe twice; Condoleezza Rice in Israel three times in as many months; three U.S. military envoys monitoring implementation on both sides; Israeli foreign minister Zipi Livni and former Palestinian prime minister Ahmed Qurei meeting, but not divulging the contents of the meetings; and Ehud Olmert and Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas meeting, not meeting, meeting again. Beyond this internal, illusionary progress, the point of a dance is performative. The dance must be seen by the outside world as a dance-toward-something—a dance of *negotiation*—but without a sincere goal in mind, the negotiations become fluff and their fruits merely a show.

An unsightly question rears its head here. If the end of the peace process is not peace, what could it be? Why on earth would so many people be participating in this game, dancing this dance, putting on this

show? Explanations turning to personal political fortunes can go just so far. It is unsettling to detect—on the Israeli side (at least)—a consistent peace-process behavior stretching back all the way to Madrid. Engaging in negotiations and being recognized as doing so may be Israel’s way of sustaining the status quo while reinforcing the facts on the ground that ensure Israeli control of as much of the Palestinian territories as conceivably and militarily possible.

This strategy recently reached its apogee in the—consensual, again—description of the agreement to be worked out in the current, Annapolis-instigated negotiations as a “shelf agreement.” Explicitly now, the peace process is expected to produce a document that does not spell out stages on the way toward peace, does not commit its signers to any concrete or realistic steps to be taken on that road, and does not provide any criteria for success or satisfaction of the phases of the route. More cynically than at any other point in the last fifteen years of peace processes, the players of the game are committing themselves, a priori, to shelving their product.

What would change the dance and make it into a progressive process, a *process* leading to *peace*? This difficult enterprise would be an investigation of that second mantra, the two-state solution that is conventional wisdom. Such an examination would derive from the realization that—maybe—the two myths are intimately connected; and—maybe—the peace process is not moving toward peace because that mythological two-state peace is wrongly, perhaps even unjustly, conceived.

Other “solutions” have been with us since the inception of Zionism. They have run the gamut from early thinkers like Hannah Arendt and Martin Buber, who viewed Palestine as a place where Jews and Palestinian Arabs could live together in a “federated state”; to Tony Judt’s notorious and superbly argued 2003 “alternative” of “a single, integrated, binational state of Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians”;⁶ and to the currently more vocal attempts by “one-staters” to present an unconventional option calling for one state, a state of all its citizens. Responses to these out-of-the-box proposals are predictably negative and usually involve the realistic assessment that Israelis would never accept such a demise of the Jewish state, a veritable taboo. More thoughtful assessments charge that the debate itself—one-state-two-state—is a diversion from more urgent crises of the ongoing occupation. But if the conventional two-state solution is now passé—whether because of a posteriori facts on the ground or due to its initial a priori unfeasibility—there is vital need of imaginative thinking, leading to courageous, unconventional policy-making, diplomatic decisions and, undoubtedly, foreign pressure. Such ideas can then function as catalysts for a bona fide peace process.

article footnotes

1 Talk at the Emil Boustani Middle East Seminar, MIT, April 1, 2008.

2 “Failure Risks Devastating Consequences,” *New York Review of Books*, November 8, 2007; <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/20750>.

3 “Into the Lion’s Den,” *New York Review of Books*, May 1, 2008; <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/21324>.

4 I am addressing here only the detrimental facts on the ground established and reinforced by Israel. This is not to say that there aren’t facts, trends and issues that have to do with the Palestinian side of things – primarily lack of PA control over armed violence and the division between Hamas and Fatah – that are relevant as well. It is to say, however, that this is not a symmetrical endeavor.

5 A more pregnant fact is Israel’s continuing occupation of Gaza (according to international law) even without settlements.

6 “Israel: the Alternative,” *New York Review of Books*, October 23, 2003; <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/16671>.



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Anat Biletzki
Center for International Studies

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Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Building E38-200
292 Main Street
Cambridge, MA 02139

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