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Solution Without Resolution

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THE latest round of fighting between Israel and the Hamas-led Gaza Strip puts in sharp relief the basic futility of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But the sad truth is that while a solution exists and has been drafted and redrafted, it is not likely to be implemented.

First, consider current the recent hostilities. Hamas and its affiliates have repeatedly launched missile strikes against Israel, provoking a predictable response. The motive is not clear, since Israel has never succumbed to such strikes and has always reacted forcefully. Moreover, since Israel unilaterally withdrew from Gaza in 2005 there is not much to be gained.

But Israel's goal of stopping the missiles by military force is hopeless as well, as Hamas military leaders who have been assassinated will be replaced and so will warheads and rockets.

Both sides are locked in a vicious cycle of violence that serves no purpose.

Then consider the broader picture. There exists a political solution to this conflict, encompassing both Gaza and the West Bank, the constituents of a future Palestine.

The solution has been articulated over and over again: in the Beilin-Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) plan proposed in 1995; in the Clinton proposals at the end of 2000; in the Geneva initiative of 2003; and in the talks then-Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni held with Mahmoud Abbas in 2007 and 2008.

These various discussions over the past two decades have reached more or less the same solution.

To put it briefly, the solution is to establish a Palestinian state in pre-1967 borders; exchange some territory to keep major blocs of settlements within Israel; divide Jerusalem; and allow for a very limited return of Palestinian refugees to Israel. There are many additional and important details, all of which have been worked out in these discussions.

But this solution is unlikely to be implemented, even though it would bring peace and prosperity to both sides, put an end to the violent rounds of conflict like the latest one and enable both sides to turn their attention to serious internal problems.

Why? The major reason is that there are significant elements on both sides that do not accept this solution.

These elements pursue their own agendas and are not ready for the difficult concessions the solutions require. Some of these elements are religious, even fundamentalist, others are nationalistic, others are both. They exist on both sides. Their intransigence is often manifested by a kind of psychological process of projection, whereby they declare that the other side cannot be trusted and is “no partner.” The symmetry between the two sides in this context is often astounding.

Some argue that these intransigent elements aside, there is a majority for a solution on both sides.

But this is a dubious proposition, for two reasons. First, elections have brought anti-solution parties into power time and again. Hamas in Gaza and Ariel Sharon and Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel are just two examples.

The fact is that a two-state solution has never been put to a vote in the Israeli Parliament, and for good reason. In what was a kind of implicit referendum, the notion was resoundingly rejected in the 2001 elections in which Sharon defeated Ehud Barak with 62 percent of the vote.

Second, even if such a majority does somehow exist, it is silent, fragmented and passive in pursuing the proposed peace solution.

What about outside help? Foreign intervention could be a solution, but none is forthcoming. The United States and Europe show no appetite for getting involved except as mediators. There is an understandable fatigue of this endless and senseless conflict. The dubious character of some of the leaders of both parties acts to further repel the West. As for Russia and China, they are not really interested except in pursuing their own goals.

The bottom line is both tragic and simple. The fact that a well-known solution exists and is rejected speaks volumes. Calls for renewed efforts to resolve the conflict are blind to this reality and to a large part express wishful thinking on the part of their authors.

There is something obsessive about the pleas to get back to the negotiations table, given that a negotiated settlement is already available. It would be better to propose practical ways to alter the underlying situation, whereby the forces opposing this settlement are so dominant.

Until such a change occurs, there is not much hope for a resolution.

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