

ANOTHER VIEWPOINT  
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ENDING THE OCCUPATION IS THE MAIN OBJECTIVE

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According to many observers the Palestinian leadership should pursue the end of occupation and not waste time on trying to stop construction of or expanding Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories (OT). The emphasis on stopping construction in the settlements as a condition for resuming negotiation is what Israel wants, as a way of gaining more benefits at the expense of the Palestinians. On the other hand, once occupation is ended, building Jewish settlements on liberated or unoccupied Palestinian territories would also stop. Therefore, emphasis in the negotiations should be shifted to ending the occupation as the main objective. There are costs and benefits to the present approach.

First, by making direct negotiations dependent on stopping construction of new settlements or expanding old ones the Palestinians create a stalemate, which gives the promoters of settlements and opponents of ending occupation more time to expand and build new settlements before the occupation ends. Construction of settlements, for whatever reason, would create new facts on the ground, which makes withdrawal to the 1967 borders more complicated and more difficult. Another cost is the high probability of clashes between the settlers and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) on one side, and the Arab owners of the land on the other, which usually costs the Palestinians life and material. Third, the passage of time while in the current unacceptable situation is itself a cost, because the Palestinians could have been working on the establishment of the state of Palestine. Finally, becoming dependent on other countries and the United Nations for survival is itself a major economic and moral cost. Many generations have been sacrificed in the process of trying to promote peace and security.

What are the benefits? The main benefit is psychological: the leaders will appear strong, holding to a principle, even though no material or political benefit comes out of it. They have almost always said NO to Israeli proposals and then when they considered accepting a proposal, it was too late. Why not meet with Netanyahu and find out what he has in mind? There is no shame in changing one's mind, especially when one finds good reasons to do so. What are the Palestinian leaders waiting for? Most probably they are waiting for the United States (US), the Quartet (the UN, the European Union, Russia, and

the US), or the Arab League to pressure Israel to stop expanding old or building new settlements. It should be evident by now that the US will not pressure Israel to do that, nor will the Quartet or the UN do it, because the US is a member of both. Nor will the Arab League be able or willing to put enough pressure on Israel to stop building settlements. The Arab countries, individually and collectively, have been unable or unwilling to use their resources to influence Israel directly or indirectly to do anything Israel is not eager to do. Therefore, the Palestinians have to depend on themselves to end the occupation.

Violence is not an option, given the huge gap between the military power of Israel and that of the Palestinians. In fact, President Abbas has declared that violence will never again be a medium for liberation and ending the occupation. One alternative is to accept the occupation, which is not practical because most of the Palestinians do not want it. A different version of continued occupation is annexing the Occupied Territories and making them a part of Israel, which also is not practical because the demographic situation favors the Palestinians against Israel. The only other option is ending the occupation through peaceful negotiation, and the best way to that is direct negotiation. President Abbas can invite Prime Minister Netanyahu to meet directly and initiate the negotiations and test his willingness to meet with Abbas continuously until a solution is found. By taking the initiative Abbas would gain international support immediately. However, special committees composed of Israelis and Palestinians should conduct serious negotiations. Third parties may join but only as observers. The committees should be specialized: one for each of the following issues: security of both parties; mutual recognition of the identity of the state; the end of occupation; the boundaries; Jerusalem; the refugees; the ideal relations between Israel and an independent state of Palestine; and everything else. These committees would embark on their duties as soon as possible. They will have legal and technical consultants to advise them on procedure and what may or may not be recommended. The idea of committees was proposed at the Madrid Conference in 1991 and some committees were formed, but the Oslo Agreement superseded the Madrid Conference and nothing came out of the committee proposal.

The committees will meet simultaneously, each concentrating on its subject matter. Each committee will try to reach the closest to an acceptable solution, regardless of how much time it takes. Of course there is no guarantee that the committee approach will succeed, but it has a good chance to succeed, since it breaks down the conflict into its several components, which helps to identify the problems that are causing a stalemate, and encourages others to show signs of success. We are just beginning a new year, which could be the beginning of a new direction by the Palestinians. It is time that they take the

initiative and request a return to the negotiations table, and not always respond to propositions or actions by Israeli leaders. Let us hope that they find a silver lining and embark on the road to an acceptable solution.

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