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von Martin

in Außenpolitik,
Security Culture

Kommentare (0)

Can we please stop pretending that the two-state solution is still a thing?

by *Martin Schmetz*

With the current conflict in Gaza going full tilt, the usual questions have popped up: Who is to blame, what is everyone's motivation and strategy, how to stop the bloodshed, how to end the conflict. And as usual, the two-state solution, i.e. two separate, sovereign states within the borders of the 1949 armistice agreement, keeps popping up as a purported solution. This is especially prominent in the statements of politicians in countries not directly involved in the conflict. Countries that at least claim to want to help end the conflict, be it through mediation or other diplomatic measures. But for those countries, the two-state solution has become an idea to hide behind. It does not help solve the conflict, neither in the short- nor mid-term. Clinging to the idea merely prolongs the status quo. However, it does allow the rest of the world to avoid facing the facts, which would force them to reevaluate their position on who to support and actually do something about the conflict as it currently is. But it's high time we face the music and admit it: The two-state solution is no longer a viable option when it comes to mediating this conflict.

It didn't have to be like this: From the Oslo peace talks in the mid-90s to the Camp David and Taba Summits in 2000 and 2001, a peaceful two-state solution seemed like an actual possibility. This all fell apart afterwards, even if the 2007 Annapolis Conference saw another call for a two-state solution from both sides. But ever since, we seem to have moved further and further away from such a solution.

At this point, the conflict consists of parties on both sides that seem unwilling to compromise (or that are mostly irrelevant, in case of PLO/Fatah). Hamas won't even recognize Israel and while it has at times accepted the concept of a two-state solution, it has only done so as a temporary measure. Its stated goal continues to be a united Palestine without Israel. There is also little love on Israel's side for Hamas (probably to nobody's surprise), which it simply deems a terrorist organization, albeit one in charge of things in the Gaza

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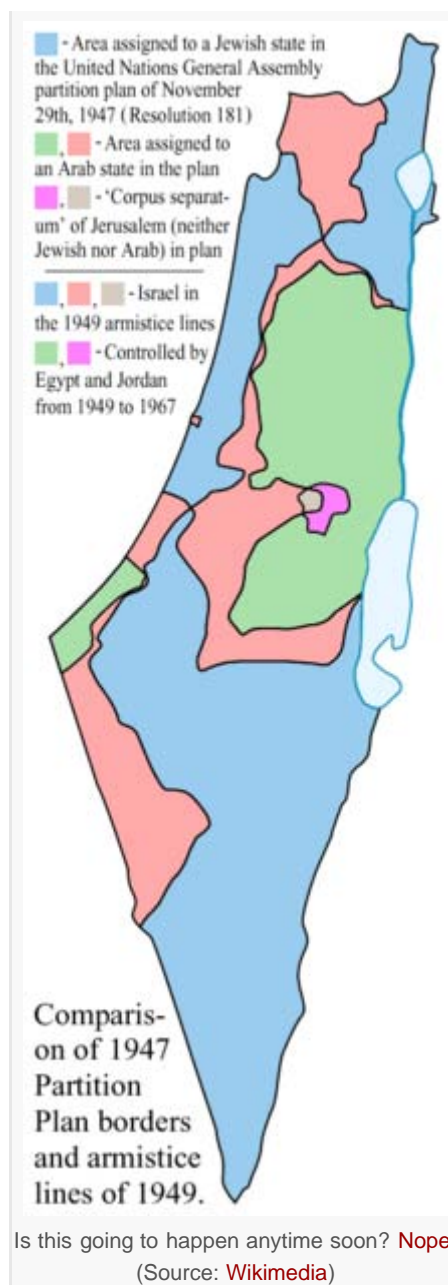
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strip and therefore responsible for whatever happens there. Outside of Gaza, Israel has continued its policy of expanding settlements in the West Bank, the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem. At this point, well over half a million people live in these settlements, most in settlements in the West Bank or East Jerusalem. While Israel has closed settlements and vacated entire areas before (in Gaza and on the Sinai), those cases both had less than 10000 inhabitants each. It seems unrealistic to assume that Israel is going to close down the settlements at this point – in fact, no government in Israel has stopped the construction of settlements for a longer period of time in the past decade. Public support on both sides for a two-state solution is also among **the lowest it has ever been**. Research suggests that continued violence will make both sides **even less likely to compromise**, so it seems likely that the trend will continue.

There is also the issue of both Hamas and Israel **benefiting from the status quo**. Hamas paradoxically needs Israel to survive because a large part of its legitimacy comes from its resistance to Israel. The blockade Israel has erected actually **helps the Hamas regime stay in power**, despite its repeated protests. Israel meanwhile can not only be glad that Hamas prevents the Gaza strip from falling into anarchy or the rise of a more fundamentalist actor, it also benefits from the status quo because Palestinian authority remains divided between the Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza. As long as there is no unified actor to speak for the Palestinians, peace talks are unlikely to happen anyway and Israel can continue its policies unchanged without offending its Western allies too badly. As Jeremy Pressman wrote in **a great post at Political Violence @ a glance**:



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“The status quo, with its apparent ambiguity, allows Israel to fudge all these points. It does just enough to stay in the good graces of the United States and the European Union. It avoids having to make West Bank Palestinians citizens. And other Israeli parties and leaders can still hope to influence Netanyahu; corner the government and compel it to be more open to compromise; or topple him and change Israel’s direction. It is not a done deal.”

From both an Israeli and a Palestinian point of view, a two-state solution seems out of reach, maybe even undesirable. This obviously ignores the plight of the civilian population in Gaza (even if their support for a two-state solution has gone down as well, as mentioned above), but if Hamas and Israel can only come together on one issue, it’s **assigning a decidedly low priority** to the lives of the civilian population in Gaza in the face of other strategic goals. ¹

Peace talks seem unlikely, then: The status quo simply doesn’t favor them and neither Israel nor Hamas seem particularly intent on challenging it. It should therefore come as no surprise that Kerry’s recent mission was a failure. But governments elsewhere don’t challenge the status quo, either: The calls for a two-state solution continue, combined with the usual denunciations of violence in nicely prepared statements. Some definitely don’t have any interest in changing their position: China, for example, has historically had good relations with most countries in the region precisely because it never really took a **substantial position in the first place**. Other countries in the region, such as Egypt or Turkey, are busy elsewhere and have little love for Hamas, while others, such as Qatar or Iran, aren’t viable partners for Israel in a peace process due to their proximity to or outright support for Hamas. Russia is also occupied otherwise, which leaves the USA and Europe, as main trading partners of Israel, close allies and the states that have traditionally been involved in the peace process as the most likely bet.

However, no politician from the US or the EU has so far dared to question the veracity of the two-state solution. There are obviously several reasons for this: Firstly, it would deeply upset every other state involved in the Middle East peace process (or what is left of it). Secondly, it would harm the relations with Israel, because no matter what the lesson drawn from the conclusion that the two-state solution is dead actually is, it will come with a lot of uncomfortable questions for Israel. Likewise, it would upset Hamas because while their stated goal is a united Palestine, it seems unlikely that the US or Europe will support their idea of such a state, making their stated end goal even less likely as a probably option in the negotiation process. Finally, at home, politicians would have to deal with a huge discussion: Who do we support? Can we still support them if the other side doesn’t get their own

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state? How much will we embarrass us internationally because anti-semitic or anti-Islam voices will enter this discourse and try to force their point of view (an especially salient issue in Europe)?

And so, we are left with an elephant in the room that is not only rapidly increasing in size, but also starting to flash and blink rapidly, something elephants simply shouldn't do. Not only does this cause the elephant metaphor to fall apart, it also leaves everyone ill-prepared for what is de facto a reality: The two-state solution is dead. There is no chance for it to happen and clinging to it will only prolong the status quo until it falls apart in face of the facts. This is a situation that is unacceptable from a humanitarian point of view and also unwise politically – ignoring this option means not discussing contingency plans, either. But ignoring political realities rarely makes them go away. Therefore, even if shaking up the status quo won't come without its own challenges, it's time to face the music and stop pretending that the two-state solution is still a viable political option. If the parties in the conflict have no incentive to think about alternatives to the two-state solution, it might be up to states outside of the immediate conflict to shake up the status quo, change the discourse and come up with alternative solutions. Given that humanitarian issues feature more prominently in the Middle East discourse in Europe, the fact that the current Middle East policies obviously don't promote peace might open the window for a frank discussion about alternatives to the two-state solution.

But the first step is saying that what has been held up as the road to peace turned out to be a dead-end. So everyone, say it with me: The two-state isn't happening. It's time to admit that and discuss the possible alternatives – and which one we prefer.

1. Yes, that is an article by The Onion. In my defense, they have the best coverage of the conflict.

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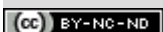
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