Don’t say ”no”

written by Prof. Zaki Shalom | 19.02.2024

On February 14, the Washington Post reported that the Biden administration and several Arab countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are seeking to present a detailed and comprehensive plan for a peace accord between Israel and the Palestinians. This plan would include a timeline for the establishment of a Palestinian state. The report further noted that this initiative, tied directly to the intense efforts to reach an Israel-Hamas agreement that would lead to a pause in the fighting and the release of hostages, could be announced within the next several weeks.

A Israel-Hamas ceasefire, projected to last for at least six weeks, would provide time to make such a plan public, and to take concrete steps toward its implementation, including the formation of an interim Palestinian government. Planners hope an agreement between Israel and Hamas can be reached before the beginning of Ramadan on March 10, 2024, but fear that an Israeli operation in Rafah will bring the initiative to a screeching halt.

The “elephant in the room”, say the leaders of the initiative, is, of course, the Israeli Government. It is unlikely that the current Israeli Goverment will acquiesce to the withdrawal of Jewish communities in Judea and Samaria (the West Bank), a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem, the reconstruction of Gaza, and the reunification of the West Bank and Gaza under one authority. To encourage Israel not to reject the plan, its authors suggest offering Israel security guarantees and normalization with Saudi Arabia and other Arab states.

Israeli Government ministers, such as Ministers Smotrich and Kisch, were quick to reject the initiative in its entirety. In an interview with ABC, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, when asked about his view on a Palestinian state, embraced a more sophisticated approach: “Everybody who talks about a two-state solution”, he told the interviewer, “I ask, what do you mean by that exactly? Should they continue to teach their children based on text books educating for terrorism and Israel’s annihilation? To that I say, of course not. The most important power that has to remain in Israel’s hands is overriding security control in the area west of the Jordan river”.

According to reports, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's recent trip to the region and the visits to Washington by Qatar's prime minister and the King of Jordan, have focused on "the substance and the sequence of all the steps" needed to set "a practical, timebound, irreversible path to a Palestinian state living side-by-side in peace with Israel". Blinken's initiative has garnered both direct and indirect support from other countries. British Foreign Secretary David Cameron has expressed public interest in early recognition of a Palestinian state. A similar statement was issued by Sven Koopmans, the European Union's special representative for the Middle East peace process.

US officials said their administration is considering early recognition of a Palestinian state, security guarantees for both Israel and the Palestinians, the pursuit of normalization, and reconstruction of the Gaza Strip.

Officials in the Arab world and the Palestinian Authority were very skeptical about this initiative's chances of implementation. They recalled that similar roadmaps, particualrly under the Obama administration, had failed in the past. Throughout the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas, they noted, President Biden has shown little inclination to stand up to Israel's masive offensive steps in the Gaza Strip, demanding only that Israel allow in more humanitarian aid and reduce civilian casualties.

From Israel and its Government's perspective, this initiative poses multiple risks. It would most probably involve the demand that Israel cease all fighting even though the objectives set for this war have yet to be achieved. Such a development would be detrimental to Israel's image of deterrence, leading it to be seen as a country that had sustained a terrible blow on October 7, and that for five months, has been unable to contend with the terrorist group which attacked it in a decisive manner.

Another risk is that countries which have signed peace agreements with Israel, primarily the countries party to the Abraham Accords, will view Israel as a country that cannot take a stand against the United States. Israel's appeal as an ally would be greatly weakened, and other Muslim countries that may have considered joining the peace process would hesitate to do so.

The question is how Israel should react. We believe that Prime Minister Netanyahu's "yes, but" response, as exemplified by his June 14, 2009 'Bar Ilan'

speech, given during the Obama Administration, is better than an absolute rejection of the initiative and a complete unwillingness to take part in any of the steps it entails.

At present, Israel can make weighty and justified arguments that would put the planners of the initiative on the defense. It could, for instance, claim that it would be hard-pressed to take on the risk of a Palestinian state so long as it faces the existential threat posed by Iran. It could argue that discussions regarding a Palestinian state must be left until after the Iranian threat has been diffused. Israel could also demand that the Palestinian leadership publicly recognize the State of Israel as the Jewish People's nation-state, as well as express its willingness to launch a massive reform of the text books used in the Palestinian Authority and Gaza Strip, and stop payments made to terrorists.

On a deeper level, and beyond all of these important conditions, Israel should make it clear that the path to a Palestinian state requires a fundamental change in the Palestinian Authority. The latter must prove its ability to act as sovereign, assuming responsibility for the territory and population of which it is in charge. Since the Palestinian Authority has to make considerable progress and changes to its leadership, while fundamentally altering its conduct, a Palestinian state can only be established at the end of this process, not at its outset. It is further important to emphasize that the very complex reality in the Gaza Strip requires its own unique and elaborate solution, and therefore, any attempt to combine the crumbling Palestinian Authority in the West Bank with the Gaza Strip will lead to utter failure in both.

The right attitude is, therefore, to think and speak in terms of a process and arrangement based on proof of performance, enabling the two territorial Palestinian units to be rehabilitated simultaneously and independently, and only then to discuss the possibility of combining them. This should all be done as part of the new regional architecture that would be based on normalization between Israel and the Arab states, particualrly Saudi Arabia. This new regional architecture could provide the support system for processes required in the Palestinian arena, and create new areas of opportunity that would allow both Israel and the Palestinians greater latitude.

We believe that Israel should present its own initiative based on an order of actions that begins with the regional setting, and that continues both with the

implementaition of the changes required in the Palestinian Authority, and the reconstrucion of the Gaza Strip. Reform of the PA and reconstruction of the Gaza Strip should be seen as two distinct and seperate processes. The reconstruciton of the Gaza Strip must be predicated on the dismantling of Hamas' governmental and military systems in Gaza, and the release of all the hostages, alongside a demand for full operation security freedom for Israel within the Strip.

We believe that an Israeli proposal that would correspond with the initiative being formulated will be welcomed and understood far better than an absolute rejection of the plan offered. It would be the right approach both topically and tactically, while serving Israel's strategic interests.