

Two states are the only solution for peace in the Middle East

Europe should prepare to support long-term Palestinian state-building

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Bonn, 20 November 2023. The war in Gaza, which Hamas started on 7 October, is unlikely to have a winner. An immediate and permanent ceasefire is needed to end civilian suffering and enable the release of hostages. It is time to plan for the aftermath, so that such a terrible war will not happen again.

This requires a workable political solution to end the tit-for-tat violence of the Middle East conflict, and an intense state building programme for Palestine. The United States, as Israel's principal protector and sponsor, will have to underwrite both processes. European governments and the EU also have important roles to play.

Politically, the Gaza war has brought the scenarios for future Israel-Palestine relations into sharp focus. Perhaps paradoxically, the war has made the 'two state' solution more probable, while 'one state' scenarios are looking increasingly unrealistic.

Israeli extremists have long dreamed of a one state solution where Palestinians would be driven out of Gaza and the West Bank to Egypt and Jordan. This position has become more mainstream in Israel in recent years as its advocates have grown in numbers and even joined the government. Aside from the fundamental moral and legal implications of such a policy, efforts to use the current crisis to destroy Palestine are not in Israel's interest. Egypt and Jordan have clear positions on Palestinian refugees and Israeli attempts to expel them would risk their peace treaties. Any hopes of normalising relations with the wider Arab world would be dashed and the long-term security, and possibly even the independence, of Israel fundamentally threatened. Moreover, such a move would likely spark major protests in Western countries, thereby risking Western governments' support for Israel's security and even its legitimacy.

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The other one state solution, dreamed of by liberals, where Jews, Muslims and Christians live together in a multi-ethnic democracy, is even less likely. The Gaza war has made recent calls for a secular democracy seem hopelessly utopian. In any case, the demographic reality of the growing Palestinian population has sparked debates about whether the Jewish state and democracy are compatible within the territory that Israel controls.

The Gaza war has also demonstrated that the current scenario, where Israel occupies the Palestinian territories and controls the borders, internal movement, livelihoods and homes of Palestinians, is unsustainable. It is starting to look like minority rule by Israel of a larger Palestinian population, increasingly reliant on repression and arbitrary detention. The occupation has not succeeded in forcing Palestinians into submission but rather has created a socio-political environment in which a terrorist organisation like Hamas can flourish and develop into a serious threat to Israeli civilians.

All that remains is a two state solution along the lines of the 1967 borders, as agreed in the 1993 Oslo accords. For this, Israeli settlers must leave the West Bank. Other long-standing aspects, including the status of Jerusalem as a holy city for all of Abraham's descendants, need to be implemented by all parties, in good faith.

The United States has the primary role to play in brokering the two state political settlement. Europe's proximity and wealth mean it will have a major role in ensuring that this settlement holds. The official position of most EU member states has long been that Israel and Palestine should live side by side in two states, even as this has appeared a remote prospect as successive agreements have failed.

European development policy will have an important role in the enormous state building effort necessary if peace is to last. An international development conference on the future of Palestine should take place as soon as practicable. A number of priorities need to be agreed. Most pressing is a strategy for supporting the emergence of Palestinian political leadership and governance institutions, most likely under UN supervision. Plans are needed for reconstruction, infrastructure and investment, including for physical links between Gaza and the West Bank, support for post-conflict reconciliation and social cohesion, the identification and preparation of key economic sectors, and the outlines of a renewed trade agreement with the EU. After many decades of violence and corruption, the immediate post-war focus will need to be on creating facts on the ground, setting up the necessary finance and mobilising public and private sector partners in the West, Asia and the Arab world.

None of these provisions for a two state political settlement and a state building plan for Palestine are new or radical. They reflect existing commitments by Israel, the Palestinian Authority, the United States, the EU and its member states, and Israel's Arab neighbours. The Gaza war has shown that these commitments offer the only reasonable way out of the cycle of violence between Israelis and Palestinians. The time has come for European governments and the EU to support Israelis and Palestinians in making a two state solution reality.