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The Two-State Delusion

The Biden administration is leading a push to recognize a Palestinian state that will be a danger to the security of Israel

BY ELLIOTT ABRAMS FEBRUARY 01, 2024



U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, left, speaks with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas during a meeting in Amman on Oct. 13, 2023. JACQUELYN MARTIN/POOL/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Everyone knows what to do about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Arrange the “two-state solution.” That has been a commonplace for decades, going back to the Oslo Accords, all the international conferences, the “Roadmap,” and the

efforts by a series of American presidents and their staffs of ardent peace processors.

In the West, the call for a “two-state solution” is mostly a magical incantation these days. Diplomats and politicians want the Gaza war to stop. They want a way out that seems fair and just to voters and makes for good speeches. But they are not even beginning to grapple with the issues that negotiating a “two-state solution” raises, and they are not seriously asking what kind of state “Palestine” would be. Instead they simply imagine a peaceful, well-ordered place called “Palestine” and assure everyone that it is just around the corner. By doing so they avoid asking the most important question: Would not an autocratic, revanchist Palestinian state be a threat to peace?

No matter: The belief in the “two-state solution” is as fervent today as ever. The German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock [said](#) it’s the “only solution” and Britain’s defense minister [chimed in](#) that “I don’t think we get to a solution unless we have a two-state solution.” Not to be outdone, U.N. Secretary General Guterres [said](#), “The refusal to accept the two-state solution for Israelis and Palestinians, and the denial of the right to statehood

for the Palestinian people, are unacceptable.” The EU’s Foreign Minister Josep Borrell [said recently](#), “I don’t think we should talk about the Middle East peace process anymore. We should start talking specifically about the two-state-solution implementation process.” What if Israel does not agree, and views a Palestinian state as an unacceptable security threat? Borrell’s answer was that “One thing is clear—Israel cannot have the veto right to the self-determination of the Palestinian people. The United Nations recognizes and has recognized many times the self-determination right of the Palestinian people. Nobody can veto it.”

In the United States, 49 Senate Democrats (out of 51) just [joined](#) to support a resolution that, according to Sen. Brian Schatz, is “a message to the world that the only path forward is a two-state solution.” Biden administration officials have been a bit more circumspect in public. At the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos in January, Secretary of State Blinken [told](#) his interviewer, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, that regional integration “has to include a pathway to a Palestinian state.” National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan [called](#) for “a two-state solution with Israel’s

security guaranteed.” And President Biden [meandered](#) around an important security point: “there are a number of types of two-state solutions. There’s a number of countries that are members of the U.N. that ... don’t have their own military; a number of states that have limitations, and so I think there’s ways in which this can work.”

The Biden administration, then, joins all enlightened opinion in saying there must be a Palestinian state, but adds that it must not have an army. No other precondition seems to exist for the creation of that state once the Palestinian Authority has been “revamped” or “revitalized” so that it becomes “effective.” And most recently, Blinken has [asked](#) his staff for policy options that include formal recognition of a Palestinian state as soon as the war in Gaza ends. This would be a massive change in U.S. policy, which for decades has insisted that a Palestinian state can only emerge from direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. But the pressure is growing, it seems, to skip niceties like negotiations and move quickly to implement the “two-state solution.”

There are three things wrong with this picture. First, none of the current proposals even

acknowledges, much less overcomes, the obstacles that have always prevented the “two-state solution.” Second, the “effective governance” reforms fall very far short of creating a decent state in which Palestinians can live freely. And most important, any imaginable Palestinian state will be a dangerous threat to Israel.

Start with the issues—beyond violence and terror—that negotiations to create a Palestinian state must resolve and are being ignored. Take borders, for instance: Where are they? In the round of negotiations in 2008, after the 2007 Annapolis Conference, Palestinian representatives demanded that Israel get out of the West Bank towns of Ariel and Ma’ale Adumim—populations 20,000 and 38,000, respectively. Are those still Palestinian demands? How many of the Israelis living in the West Bank must leave? Must the new state of Palestine must be *judenrein*?

But those are the *simpler* border issues; the tough one is Jerusalem. Will East Jerusalem be the capital of a Palestinian state? If so, what does that mean? The old Arab Quarter only, or the Christian and Armenian quarters too? Do their residents have any say in this? Is it actually being proposed that the

Western Wall would be the Israeli border, and if you stand there and look up you are looking at another country? Or that David's Citadel and the Tower of David would be in Palestine? A look at the map of Jerusalem shows how impractical is the division of Jerusalem again if the city is to thrive, but what about politics? Which Israeli politicians of the left or center are going to be in favor of dividing Jerusalem again, going back to the pre-1967 days—and doing it in the aftermath of the Hamas massacres of Oct. 7?

The Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 is sometimes suggested as the basis for negotiations, but it demands “Full Israeli withdrawal from all the territories occupied since 1967, including the Syrian Golan Heights, to the June 4, 1967 lines as well as the remaining occupied Lebanese territories in the south of Lebanon.” More border troubles! Especially since the U.S. has recognized Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, which includes areas claimed by the Lebanese.

And what about the issue of “refugees?” UNRWA, the U.N.'s discredited but powerful Palestinian refugee agency, says there are 5.9 million “Palestinian refugees,” using its definition that

includes generation after generation no matter what citizenship they have. Will there be a “right of return?” In the negotiations in 2008, the private Palestinian demand was much smaller—in the range of 10,000 or 15,000. But Israeli negotiators rejected those numbers, taking a position of principle against the “right of return” but also noting the impossible problem of deciding who would qualify for it. Will Palestinian politicians agree to abandon it once and for all? If not, how will negotiations succeed?

Second, suppose negotiations do succeed and the borders of a Palestinian state are drawn. Does anyone care what is going on *inside* those borders? In January Secretary Blinken [said](#), “It’s I think very important for the Palestinian people that they have governance that can be effective. ...” They need a Palestinian Authority, he said, that can “actually deliver what the Palestinian people want and need. ...”

There are some words missing in all the calls for a Palestinian state—words like democracy, human rights, and liberty. EU Foreign Minister Borrell said in 2022 that “our message to the incoming Israeli government, which we hope will confirm the

country's full commitment to the shared values of democracy and rule of law, and with which we hope to engage in serious conversation on the conflict and the need to re-open the political horizon for the Palestinian population." This is not new: In his speech in Israel in 2013, President Obama called for "Two states for two peoples. ... [T]he only way for Israel to endure and thrive as a Jewish and democratic state is through the realization of an independent and viable Palestine."

It seems the existing state between Jordan and the Mediterranean must be democratic but not the new one. Why the distinction? Because no one thinks the Palestinian state will be a democratic state—or seems much to care. *Palestine* might be free, but no one seems to care whether *Palestinians* will be.

Why not? Natan Sharansky explained in 2000 that "Israel and the West are too quick to rely on strong leaders for stability. Democracies often prefer to deal with dictators who have full control." That was the view Israel took in the Oslo Accords, handing the Palestinians over to Yasser Arafat. His dictatorial control was thought to be an advantage to Israel, for he would supposedly crush Hamas. The Gaza war demonstrates how tragically wrong that

outlook proved to be, because the corrupt and ineffective Fatah autocracy proved to be no match for the corrupt and effective Hamas terrorists who turned Gaza into an armed camp.

Today, just about no one but Sharansky is calling for Palestinian democracy. The Arab states are not, of course, because not one of them is a democracy. The Europeans and Americans are not, I imagine, because they do not believe the Palestinians can do it—can create a working democracy. So the U.S. and the EU are willing to create a Palestinian state in the hope that it would be a better autocracy than it is at present—better at policing the terrorist groups, better at fighting corruption, and less repressive.

How likely is that? Fighting corruption, for example, requires a free press to investigate it and independent courts to try cases. But no one (except Sharansky!) is calling for any of that as a precondition for declaring a Palestinian state. So it is highly likely that a new Palestinian Authority will soon be as corrupt as the current one.

But there's a much deeper problem: No one is explaining how that state will live in "peace and security" with Israel if its people would prefer war

with Israel. What if, to use Blinken's language, "what the Palestinian people want" is mostly to destroy Israel?

And they may: Opinion polls suggest that very many Palestinians and not just those in Hamas consider the State of Israel illegitimate, want it eliminated, and favor "armed struggle." That is, their Palestinian nationalism is not positive—mainly about building a democratic, prosperous, peaceful state of their own—but negative, mainly about destroying the Jewish state. According to a recent poll, if the last parliamentary election were repeated now, Hamas would win an outright majority.

But then what is the nature of the Palestinian state that Western governments are demanding? A terrorist state? A state with a coalition government that is half terrorist, based on admittance of Hamas into the PLO? A state that is an autocracy where "armed struggle" against Israel is widely popular and is prevented only by severe repression by local authorities—who are bound to become increasingly unpopular as they resist the popular will for a fight? Or, conversely, a state like Lebanon, where the authorities are too weak to restrain Hezbollah and

in fact have become complicit in the group's activities? And creating that state is supposed to be the *solution* to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Despite all this, Israelis are supposed to be reassured that a Palestinian state will be no threat to them because it will have no army and will be "demilitarized." Israelis are not so dumb—nor should we be.

Perhaps there will be no standing army. But when the Palestinians decide to "upgrade" their police by purchasing armored personnel carriers or night vision goggles, or "defensive" weapons like drones or submachine guns, who will stop them? If your answer is "surely, Israel," you may be right—but Israel will no longer be able to do that the way it now does, by patrolling the West Bank. Instead its only recourse would be invading or attacking the new sovereign state. Would those Israeli measures to enforce the demilitarization be applauded and defended by the British and the Germans and the U.N. secretary general? Will they be defended in Washington? Or will they be called acts of war across sacred international boundaries? Wait until the International Court of Justice gets the case.

What other “demilitarization” measures will be imposed by the “international community” on Palestine? A ban on treaties with other nations? A ban on permitting an Iranian embassy, which will on the day it opens be a nest of spies and an arms depot? What about a Syrian embassy, or a Lebanese embassy with a Hezbollah presence? Who will inspect diplomatic pouches carrying arms and ammunition for terrorists? Will dual use items be banned in all Palestinian commercial agreements with Russia and China and North Korea?

It’s true that limitations on Palestinian sovereignty can be built into any “two-state solution” and Palestinian officials can sign them in blood. But the blood will fade; the limitations will be viewed by Palestinians the way most Germans viewed the limitations imposed by the Versailles Treaty. Those who seek to live with them will be called traitors, and those who demand abrogating or violating them will be “nationalists” and heroes. And the Israelis will find many deaf ears in the “international community” about the growing dangers, until they try to do their own enforcement. Then they will hear loud voices in every U.N. body

and dozens of world capitals, denouncing their aggression against the new Palestine.

Now add Iran to that mix. The great threats to Israel today (unless and until Iran develops a nuclear weapon) all come from Iranian proxy groups: Hezbollah, the Houthis, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the rest. The day a Palestinian state is declared is the day Iran hypes up its efforts—which are already considerable—to turn the West Bank into what Gaza became in the last decade: a maze of arsenals, training centers, tunnels, launching sites, and bases for terrorist attacks. Only this time the geography will be different, because the hills of Judea and Samaria overlook Ben-Gurion Airport, Jerusalem, and the coastal plain where most of Israel's economy, its largest port, and its largest city are located.

Iranian-supplied weapons will be sneaked into "Palestine" from Syria, over the Jordanian border. Even if one postulates that the Jordanians may try to stop this, they have been unable to stop the current weapons flows and Iran will be trying much harder. Israelis now refer to the Iranian "ring of fire" that surrounds them, in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Gaza, and to a lesser extent the West Bank.

Adding a Palestinian state will be a great Iranian achievement and will add a vital piece to that ring of fire.

Amazingly enough, that seems to be the new “Biden Doctrine”—as Thomas Friedman [describes](#) it in *The New York Times*. The Biden Doctrine calls for recognizing a Palestinian state (“NOW,” as Friedman puts it) “that would come into being only once Palestinians had developed a set of defined, credible institutions and security capabilities to ensure that this state was viable and that it could never threaten Israel.” But in the real world those institutions and capabilities will never be developed, so the pressure will mount from day one to lower the bar and start planning Independence Day parties. First the Arabs, then the Europeans, and finally the United States will recognize whatever exists in the West Bank and Gaza; that’s the Biden Doctrine when it comes to fruition.

The other relevant part of that new Doctrine, according to Friedman, is “a strong and resolute stand on Iran, including robust military retaliation against Iran’s proxies and agents in the region.” In other words, the same mug’s game the United States has been playing for 40 years: Iran pays no price for

its murderous activities because we punish only the proxies while Iran itself is sacrosanct. Biden policy toward Iran has from his first day in office been to weaken sanctions, to watch as Iran moves toward a nuclear weapon, and to keep repeating that “we want no conflict with Iran” while it attacks American soldiers. Leaks from the administration that it will soon hit Iranian targets in Iraq and Syria, giving Iran time to vacate those sites, suggest that the United States will continue to play slightly new versions of the old game.

Creating a Palestinian state will not end the “Israeli-Palestinian conflict” because it will not end the Palestinian and now Iranian dream of eliminating the State of Israel. On the contrary, it can be a launching pad for new attacks on Israel and will certainly be viewed that way by the Jewish state’s most dedicated enemies. A peaceful Palestinian state that represents no threat to Israel is a mirage. It is an illusion indulged by people in the West who want to seem progressive and compassionate, and those in the Arab world who fear resisting the powerful anti-Israel currents that circulate there and are now fortified by Iran. The future security of

Israel depends in good part on resisting the two-state formula for endless conflict.

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