



By: **Ferry Biedermann**

Spectre of Hamas haunts UN two-state conference



The UN **conference** in New York on the two-state solution in Israel/Palestine at first sight appears to have been oddly timed. Shouldn't the first priority be ending the horrible carnage, starvation, and suffering in Gaza?

In fact, this is what the conference was driving at, albeit in a roundabout way. Many attendees and organisers seem still too timid to address the crisis directly and instead back a longer-term diplomatic initiative.

They might hope that the message will be received both in Jerusalem and Washington: protecting the Palestinian population and preventing ethnic cleansing – apart from the moral obligation to do so – is the minimal requirement for any future settlement in the region, be it two-state or otherwise.

And indeed, **France**, the **UK**, or any other major country recognising a Palestinian state is signalling that whatever actions Israel takes on the ground, the Palestinian issue will not be dismissed.

Yet this is scant consolation in Gaza and the West Bank. It could even look hollow if not accompanied urgently with concrete steps to end the suffering of the population in Gaza.

The prospect of a definitive end to the violence in Gaza remains remote

But here the underlying **context** of the UN conference crops up again: the prospect of a definitive end to the violence in Gaza is still remote.

The world will, hopefully, belatedly exert real pressure on Israel to let enough aid and food into Gaza, but that's still not the same as effecting a long-term stop to Israeli military action, let alone provide a post-war structure that offers any hope of stability.

Despite there appearing to be enough evidence that Israeli actions in Gaza are beyond the pale, many countries are still

reluctant to deploy the kind of pressure that might, though not for sure, have an impact. This is not only true for the West, but even for countries in the region.

Very few want to see militant Islamist Hamas, which rejects the two-state solution, remain a viable force

Part of this equation, besides factors such as US protection and Israeli integration in global trade and technology networks, is that very few want to see militant Islamist Hamas, which rejects the two-state solution, remain a viable force.

They want even less for it to continue to govern Gaza, particularly after its attack of 7 October 2023 on Israel, that started the current round of bloodletting.

European countries, as much as neighbours such as Egypt and Jordan, are caught between the horror and domestic destabilisation that Israel's assault on Gaza is causing and the apprehension of seeing a return to the status quo ante, albeit in much worse and even far more destabilising conditions.

A prerequisite for peace

The Palestinian Authority's (PA) Prime Minister, Mohammad Mustafa, on the first day of the conference in New York, **addressed** this issue: "Israel must withdraw completely from the Gaza Strip, and Hamas must relinquish its control over the strip and hand over its weapons to the Palestinian Authority."

The PA has an obvious stake in diminishing or getting rid of Hamas, its long-time rival. Yet, Mustafa so clearly linking the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza to what would in effect be the surrender of Hamas also reflects the outcome of discussions that France and other participants in the conference have had with the PA.

Having the West Bank and Gaza unified under one central Palestinian Authority is often seen as a prerequisite for restarting a peace process

In this scenario, the end of the Gaza war will not only bring relief for the Palestinian population, it could be the harbinger of a process that restores the centrality of the two-state solution.

It also works the other way around, ostensibly: offering a political horizon would help end the war in Gaza.

Having the West Bank and Gaza unified under one central Palestinian Authority is often seen as a prerequisite for restarting a peace process that should lead to a Palestinian state.

Even deeper trouble for the two-state solution

There are countless problems with this line of thinking, from beginning to end. First of all, Hamas is not about to be defeated in Gaza, as a steady stream of Israeli casualties attests to. Nor has it handed over all the hostages.

The prospects of it giving up are remote for now, or ever, regardless of the cost to Palestinian civilians.

If the Israeli military, with all its might, let alone its degree of impunity, is unable to suppress Hamas, then who will? Certainly not the under-armed, under-funded, corruption-riddled, and deeply disliked PA.

The Fatah-ruled PA that is based in the West Bank lost the last legislative elections to Hamas, in 2006, and has only become less popular since. Many accuse it of being too compliant with Israel and of only being interested in perpetuating its own clientelist system.

This not only undermines the prospects of it

being able to take over Gaza from Hamas, it also casts doubt on its ability to move towards a two-state solution, which Israel in any case now opposes. Israel has also hobbled the PA and hindered Palestinian political initiatives.

Israel holds most of the cards and is moving further away from envisaging two states

Here the two-state solution, or any other, runs into even deeper trouble. Even if the PA, or a more efficient replacement, could become a realistic Palestinian advocate and partner, the other side, Israel, holds most of the cards and is only moving ever further away from envisaging two states between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean.

This uncompromising attitude, and worse, is now a matter of government policy, not just of the extreme, national-religious settler fringe, which is not a fringe anymore.

Not only are these extremists in government, the so-called mainstream Likud party and some other more centrist factions collude and sympathise with them.

This includes government officials and ministers issuing apparent genocidal statements on Gaza, supporting anti-Palestinian violence in the West Bank, and closing down any two-state notions.

Arguably, the responsibility extends even further, with Israel's centre and centre-left traditionally either mostly ignoring or downplaying both settler and military impunity in the occupied territories.

No easy solutions

Granted, there are no easy solutions. Violence, although hugely skewed, has not just been a one-way street. And trauma, distrust, and polarisation are mutual.

Even a two-state situation would only be the

starting point for ending the conflict, rather than offering an immediate conclusion to it. For that matter, a one-state solution is no better.



The two-state conference has one thing right, it will take a political approach to break the deadlock in Gaza

The same enmities and imbalances would persist and could just as easily lead to the kind of internecine violence seen elsewhere.

Whatever form a future settlement of the conflict takes, two states, one state, a federal state, or differently, the international community will have to take a much more active role in coaxing, cajoling, and forcing the two sides to de-escalate and, above all, protect the civilian populations.

Even with “crippling sanctions”, as a group of Israeli public figures has **advocated**, this will unfortunately be a tall order. Nor is any cessation of attacks from Hamas guaranteed, particularly in the medium- to long-term.

The two-state conference has one thing right, it will take a political approach to break the deadlock in Gaza.

What most countries are still not willing to contemplate is that this in all likelihood involves acknowledging that for now, Hamas will survive – and even stay in place – however unpalatable that might be and however much that runs counter to the prospects for any negotiated long-term solution.