

For decades, Western policy on Israel/Palestine has been based on the concept of two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side within secure and recognised borders. This stems from UN Security Council Resolution 242 of November 1967, 'Land for Peace', a key element of which is Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied in the Six Day War of June 1967. But as time passes and facts are established on the ground the feasibility of the two-state solution has been looking increasingly in question. Nevertheless, we continue to cling to it because the implications of doing otherwise are too uncomfortable and daunting for most to contemplate.

The main obstacle for years was seen as the rapid increase in Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank, Golan Heights and East Jerusalem. There are more than 400,000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank and a further 300,000 Israeli citizens in East Jerusalem. It's not just a question of numbers. The strategic location of the more than 130 settlements (many well beyond the Green Line), and the network of 'settler only' roads linking them to Israel proper, mean that a future Palestinian state would lack any contiguity and be of increasingly questionable viability. Moreover, the political and practical obstacles to withdrawal from occupied territory of so many settlers have become increasingly daunting, to the point where it has seemed almost impossible to envisage. Even the withdrawal of 5000 settlers from Gaza in 2005 caused major ructions.

Bibi Netanyahu, in power for the past 10 years, has never shown the slightest will to implement a two-state solution. He opposed the Oslo Accords, boasted of sabotaging them, and has been a strong supporter of settlement activity. In recent years, his overwhelming preoccupation has been his own political survival. As Saeb Erekat commented quite a few years ago, Israeli policy has been to profess to be ready to share the pizza while at the same time continuing to devour the pizza.

Enter stage left the Trump Administration. Trump did give perfunctory backing to the two-state solution in 2018, but key players such as Jared Kushner and the US Ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, a strong supporter of West Bank settlements, have since distanced themselves from the concept. The launch of 'the Deal of the Century' has been repeatedly delayed, but it appears to consist of economic inducements for the Palestinians, a rump Palestinian entity in Gaza and northern Sinai (to be ceded by Egypt), little islands of Palestinian control over areas of urban habitation, and the annexation of most of the West Bank by Israel. Such an outcome would be utterly unacceptable to Palestinians and would be difficult for the Arab world to swallow even allowing for the quiescent state of the leadership in Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

Meanwhile, the White House have been implementing a policy of incremental changes in policy away from Long established US policy. First was the move of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Long promised by successive Presidential candidates but never delivered, the move is now irreversible. Next was US recognition in March 2019 of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, seized from Syria in 1967 and effectively annexed by Israel in 1981. This marks a further change that is bound to make a peaceful settlement of the conflict more difficult and distant. It makes the US the first state to recognise annexation. Now Secretary of State Pompeo has stated, in November 2019, that Israeli settlement activity is 'not inconsistent with international law'. This may have come as a surprise to State Department legal advisers. In company with the rest of the international community, the US has hitherto held that, while the Israeli occupation is not illegal, the establishment of settlements is a clear violation of the 4th Geneva Convention.

# Dragoman

Where does that leave the two-state solution? Netanyahu has threatened to annex the West Bank, but that appears to be an electoral ploy and he seems in no hurry to do so. The White House last year indicated that the US might recognise the lesser step of annexation of West Bank settlements. Either way, it is very hard - barring some wholly unforeseen calamity - to envisage circumstances in which the concept of a two-state solution could be translated into reality. Such a settlement remains technically possible, via land swaps of equal value between Israel and a future Palestinian state. Polls show majority support on both sides for such a solution. But the same polls confirm that neither Israelis nor Palestinians believe that such an outcome will happen. It is not altogether surprising that we continue to pay lip service to the idea of a two-state solution. The alternatives are unappetising:

- Deal of the Century: it's highly doubtful if that would wash, despite the conservative Arabs' desperation not to offend the Trump administration, since it departs so radically from international norms (non-acquisition of territory by force) and the requirements of UN resolutions. Launch repeatedly delayed;
- A single multiethnic state: The Palestinians would have no objection to this, provided it was based on democratic rights for all. But it would mean the death of the Zionist dream, which is why so many Israeli doves are deeply opposed to the settlement project;
- A single state, but without democratic rights for Palestinians: Impossible to reconcile with Israel's status as a democracy, and would be unacceptable to many Israelis as well as to Western democracies;
- Expulsion of Palestinians: Surely a nonstarter, though sometimes mentioned by the Israeli extremist fringe.

Hence what I term the 'non solution solution', namely more or less indefinite continuation of the status quo, an ongoing process of creeping annexation, further moves by the White House away from the international consensus (perhaps including the Deal of the Century, though experienced and well informed diplomatic colleagues of mine regard it as a shell game for creeping annexation and unlikely ever to be launched) - all accompanied by expressions of readiness in principle for open ended peace talks. At some point, the final straw will no doubt break the camel's back. But not in 2020.



**Sir Kieran Prendergast, KCVO, CMG**

Sir Kieran Prendergast KCVO, CMG led a distinguished career in the British Foreign Office, serving as British Ambassador to Turkey and High Commissioner to Zimbabwe and Kenya. Sir Kieran remains active in the field of conflict management and resolution through his role at the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.