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Frontier Politics: Israel, Palestine and the Current Talks

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By Guy Burton

With direct talks starting between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, a range of different issues are on the table – and will need to be negotiated if a complete agreement is to be achieved within the proposed one-year deadline. One of those will be the question of the border between Israel and a future Palestinian state. To date there has been plenty of ink spilled over where the border should be located. The sources of contention include the issue of land swaps between the two sides, the presence of settlements, and the status of Jerusalem – with both sides claiming it as their capital. Underpinning this discussion are two crucial factors that need to be taken into account: on one hand, there exist differing visions for the border and therefore differing approaches favoured by each side; and, on the other hand, there is the question of governance of the future boundary (i.e. whether it should be managed between the two sides or with the support of a third party).

Placing the Border

The Palestinians and Israelis have very different ideas of where the border should be located. Without reconciling these differences, it is questionable whether any final status agreement would be sustainable. For the Palestinians, their public position is that the border should follow the Green Line, which before 1967 separated Israel from Jordan and Gaza Egypt. The Israelis, by contrast, have been less adamant about the Green Line serving as a decisive international border. This is particularly evident given the state encouragement of Jewish Israeli settlements in the West Bank (and until 2005, in Gaza) since 1967.

The lack of a clear endgame has been an advantage and a disadvantage for Israel. For example, Israel's unwillingness to define clear boundaries helped it expand and contract the state as necessary. That boundary flexibility enabled Israel to accommodate both the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza after 1967, to accept the loss of the Sinai following the 1973 war and to evacuate settlements from Gaza in 2005. In this framework of unclear borders, for many Israelis (especially younger ones), the Green Line has become meaningless because they assume the 'Security' Wall, built within the Green Line following the Second Intifada, is the 'real' border between Israel and Palestine.

At the same time, the absence of a clearly defined vision of border delineation challenges the Israeli concerns regarding both security and the future status of the settlements. Israel's leadership and the current Netanyahu government emphasise their concern with security, an issue prevalent in Israeli discourse since 1976, when the Allon Plan identified the Jordan Valley region as a potential risk for the transit of weapons from Jordan into the West Bank. Although that fear diminished over subsequent decades (including through the final peace settlement signed between Israel and Jordan in 1994), security-minded Israelis continue to demand a final say over any Palestinian-Jordanian border. Indeed, at a July 2010 meeting of the Israel-Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI) NGO in Jerusalem, Shlomo Gazit, a former major general in the Israeli army and the coordinator of operations in the West Bank after 1967, recommended a diminished Palestinian role in border management.

Addressing the Settlements

Meanwhile, the future status of Israeli settlements within the West Bank remains uncertain. A full Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank (as demanded by the Palestinians) poses the question of whether the Israeli settlers remaining in the West Bank would be prepared to become Palestinian citizens or become foreign residents in a Palestinian state. If the settlers opt for the latter there is a risk that Israel may not renounce its right to intervene in the West Bank. However, anything other than a complete military evacuation by Israel would reduce Palestinian territorial sovereignty. This has prompted the settlers' leadership to talk favourably about a 'one-state' solution. This recommendation, though, is substantially different from the prevailing – and idealistic – model proposed by the Israeli Left and part of the Palestinian population, who see a bi-national single state with equal citizenship between the two communities as a viable alternative to the continued failure to achieve two separate states. While this model is an inspired solution, the leaders of the settlement movement have a vision that is closer to the present reality within Israel: where Jewish Israelis are full citizens and Arab-Israelis (or Palestinian-Israelis) are effectively marginalised and have to earn the right to citizenship.

Managing the Border

The question of governance over a future Israel-Palestinian border will need to be addressed in the talks. In particular this concerns the extent to which the border will be 'open' or 'closed' – neither of which may necessarily benefit the Palestinians. One of the ironies of Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories after 1967 was the growing 'openness' and increasing exchange between the two communities, especially economically. By the time the First Intifada broke out in 1987 there were a considerable number of Palestinian workers crossing into Israel. The First Intifada, the Oslo process and the Second Intifada all served to reduce contact between Israelis and Palestinians. Perhaps the most visible manifestation of this is the Security Wall. Also, Israelis rarely enter into Palestinian-controlled areas and the complex pass system limits Palestinians from travelling between the West Bank and Jerusalem. Furthermore, the pass system limited most Palestinians' exposure to Israelis to those Israelis serving in the military at the checkpoints.

Economic Factors

A key concern for Palestinian negotiators will be whether a future border with Israel will undermine its economy. Despite the 'closed' nature of the Security Wall, an estimated 25,000 Palestinians continue to cross through it into Israel to work each year. However, there is no evidence that their status will be improved in the event of a final border agreement between Israel and a future Palestinian state. At another IPCRI event in August 2010, Ephraim Kleiman, an economics professor at Jerusalem's Hebrew University and a senior adviser to the Israelis during their economic negotiations with the Palestinians in 1993-94, argued that following separation, Israel would be less concerned with maintaining economic links with an independent Palestine. This could lead to a complete shutout of any economic contact between the two sides. A month previously, Shlomo Gazit envisaged a future where borders would need to be closed between Israel and an independent Palestine for at least a generation, in order to achieve greater security.

At the same time, a more open border may not work to the Palestinians' advantages. Currently Palestinian products are dependent on Israeli controls to pass through to export markets. Moreover, this does not look like it will change: in 2009 the World Bank reported that future commercial traffic from an independent Palestine into Israel would involve a 'back-to-back system' through the Security Wall, where goods are off-loaded from trucks on one side of the border to others on the other side – a system similar to that currently in place in Gaza according to a 2009 World Bank report. This will ensure higher transportation costs for Palestinian firms, which will act as a further disadvantage in relation to a more competitive Israeli economy, including in terms of product diversification and access to export markets.

Limited liberalisation of trade at the border may only serve to perpetuate the economic disparity between Israelis and Palestinians. Even if Israeli restrictions on investment were removed as a result of a two-state solution (e.g. an ending of Israelis' visa restrictions on foreigners wanting to do business in the West Bank), there remains the fact that much of the work undertaken by Palestinians in Israel is poorly paid and offers few future prospects. Moreover, there is a risk that a similar situation to that which exists in regard to the 'maquilas' (or sweatshops) between the US and Mexico may develop. In particular this would involve the sub-contracting aspects of production to low-wage and low-skilled Palestinian labour with Israeli firms marking up and collecting the greater profit margin. The disadvantage of such a model is two-fold: first, it will not provide sufficient wages to Palestinian labourers to escape subsistence; and second, it will not offer a means of sustainable and value-added development for the Palestinian economy.

Conclusion

In sum then, the question of the Israel-Palestine border encapsulates in microcosm the broader challenges facing the two sides in the upcoming direct talks. The status and management of the final borders – whether open or closed – are vital aspects for any final agreement. Furthermore, the issue of a future Israel-Palestine border captures the difference in power relations between the two sides. Although the public impression is of two sides coming to the negotiating table as equals, the reality is that the talks will favour the Israeli position over the Palestinians: the Israeli position is both more fluid (as demonstrated by its flexible approach to border placement) but also more dominant, owing to its troops' control of the land and movement into, within and out of the Palestinian territories.

Nowhere is Israel's strength more apparent than if the talks either fail or succeed. If they fail, the prospect of two independent states will be undermined and the drive towards the one-state solution proposed by the settler leadership hastened further. If they succeed then it is likely that the Palestinian economy will continue to be dependent on Israel. In such circumstances – and given the degree of animosity that exists between the two communities – the role of the international community, as third-party guarantors of the border and as a source of investment will be vital if Israel and an independent Palestine are ever to become equals.

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