Hard Times for Peace Between Two Internally Divided Societies

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Abstract

These are not promising days for those who desire peace between Israelis and Palestinians, with two states respected by each other and recognized by the international community, living securely side by side. Richard Falk's article rightly stresses the negative role played by the US Government in its sharp rejection of the Palestinian bid for statehood at the United Nations Security Council. The problem, however, seems to lie deeper in these complex societies and their current political leaderships.

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Hard times for peace between two internally divided societies

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These are not promising days for those who desire peace between Israelis and Palestinians, with two states respected by each other and recognized by the international community, living securely side by side. Richard Falk's article rightly stresses the negative role played by the US Government in its sharp rejection of the Palestinian bid for statehood at the United Nations Security Council. The problem, however, seems to lie deeper in these complex societies and their current political leaderships.

The speeches delivered by Benjamin Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas at the United Nations General Assembly did not give the impression of leaders truly committed to the cause of peace, and willing to make the tough compromises required to end the conflict. Netanyahu did not mention the construction of Jewish settlements in occupied territories that should be part of the Palestinian state, a policy that has received abundant investment from nationalist and religious Jewish communities in Israel and abroad, and that is creating a situation of no return. Abbas, on the other hand, was eloquent about Palestinian rights, but did not give hints about the acceptance of a Jewish state in Israel, without which Israel will not enter into negotiations. Furthermore, he provided arguments to those in Israel who fear the establishment of a Palestinian state when he mentioned the religious roots of Christianity and Islam in that land, while conspicuously ignoring the roots of Judaism.

I disagree with Richard Falk's assertion that "dropping the deal-breaking insistence on being confirmed as 'a Jewish state'" is a prerequisite for peace. This ignores the history that led to the establishment of the state of Israel and is not a plausible demand for the near future. While it is necessary to assure democracy in Israel, insisting on having the state renounce its Jewish character as a precondition for peace is a sure road to indefinitely postponing the two-state solution, or any solution at all.

At stake in this debate are at least two problematic issues: the question of Palestinian governance and the construction of collective identity in deeply complex and divided societies, as the Palestinian and Israeli societies are. While the boundaries of sovereignty may be reduced to the establishment of clear borders and of authorities capable of monopolizing the coercive apparatus of the state, solidarity between its members is a much more subjective and difficult issue.

Solidarity is a feeling among members of a community by which they relate to each other as equals and as forming part of a larger unit. Often, this sense of community is enhanced by the distinction between "us" and "them," to which the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century attests. But national identity is only one among many subjective notions bringing together a group of people in an imagined community, to use Benedict Anderson's concept. If we were asked to wait for both Israelis and Palestinians to resolve the issue of their respective identities as a people in order to bring about peace, then we had better sit down and wait.

Hanna Lerner's new book, Making Constitutions in Deeply Divided Societies, analyzes precisely this collective identity problem with regard to the achievement of basic social consensus. "Where polities are still grappling with the very definition of their collectivity, crafting a formal

democratic constitution that reflects shared norms and values is a daunting challenge," she writes. Moreover, Lerner warns that, far from mitigating conflicts and promoting democracy, constitution-making in post-conflict situations may pose a great level of stress in divided societies, as has been the case in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Like Ireland in 1922 and India in 1947, Israel in 1948 deferred controversial decisions regarding the character of the state, and managed to formulate a material, unwritten, constitutional arrangement in a gradualist rather than a "revolutionary" process. The difficult Palestinian construction of a collective identity seems to make it a candidate for a similar constitutional process. Today, internal divisions include not only the secular-religious divide, but also different worldviews arising from vastly different realities among a diverse population.

The polarization within both the Israeli and Palestinian societies creates a complex scenario for peace. The Israeli electorate has increasingly moved towards the right in recent years, with the result of public policies that have created unprecedented levels of inequality, straining society to the point of massive citizen protest against the economic model. On the other hand, Richard Falk casts doubts on the legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority to represent the several dimensions of the Palestinian people. These are big questions that will need an incremental, internal political debate within each society. The worldviews, needs, and concerns of Palestinian refugees are not the same as those of Palestinians living in Arab countries, the West Bank, or Gaza; nor are they the same for those who are secular, Christian, or Muslim.

There is indeed little room for optimism. Social divisions increase the difficulties in achieving the necessary legitimacy for effective governance and negotiations. Nevertheless, the international community and all parties involved are responsible for creating conditions towards the advancement of peaceful coexistence between a sovereign Israel and a sovereign Palestinian state.

Claudia Heiss is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Universidad de Chile's INAP. She obtained her PhD from the New School for Social Research with a dissertation on states of constitutional exception, and an M.A. from Columbia University. She also graduated as a Journalist at Universidad de Chile. She has published a co-authored article about the 1989 reforms in Chile in the journal Latin American Politics and Society (2007) and a co-authored chapter on civil society and democracy in the book "La experiencia ciudadana" (Catalonia 2006). She also published an article about John Rawls (2007) and book reviews for Revista de Ciencia Política and Bulletin of Latin American Research.