

Essay 9 - The Peace Process – what are the issues?

- **The key issues in the Peace Process are borders (and hence settlements), the status of Jerusalem, security, the right to return of refugees, and mutual recognition of Israel as a nation state of the Jewish people and Palestine as the nation state of the Palestinians.**

Borders

The primary issue is the border between Israel and the West Bank, which along with the Gaza Strip is expected to become part of a Palestinian state in a permanent status agreement. Until the 1967 Six Day War the de facto border was the 'Green Line' – i.e. the armistice line agreed in 1949 between Israel and its Arab enemies. The Green Line was never recognised as a formal border because no peace treaty was ever concluded.

At its narrowest, Israel west of the Green Line is only 9 miles wide, and this is regarded by Israel as a major security threat. Jerusalem is also seen as vulnerable within the pre-1967 borders because its geographical position.

Since 1967 Israel has built settlements – i.e. Jewish communities and towns east of the Green Line, as well as new neighbourhoods around Jerusalem. Some settlements are in areas from which the Jews were expelled by the Jordanian Arab legion in 1948. Some 80% of Israelis living east of the Green Line live in a small number of settlement blocks, which could be included in Israel's borders by Israel annexing about 6 per cent of the West Bank. Smaller and more isolated settlements will fall outside of Israel's borders in any future agreement.

The Palestinians reject the legitimacy of all these settlements, insisting that any peace agreement must be based on the Green Line, with only minimal adjustments. Israel expects all the major settlement blocks near the Green Line to become part of Israel, with the Palestinians being compensated by land elsewhere – i.e. land swaps. A solution of this nature was envisaged in the Clinton parameters (guidelines for a permanent-status agreement) of 2000.

Jerusalem

Jerusalem was divided between Israel and Jordan in 1948, with Israel being cut off from the Old City and its holy sites. Israel formally annexed East Jerusalem and reunited the city after capturing it in 1967. However, the Muslim religious authorities (the Waqf) still exercise control of the Temple Mount, site of the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. Israel considers all of Jerusalem, including neighbourhoods built over the Green Line since 1967, to be its sovereign capital city. The Palestinians insist on establishing the capital of a Palestinian state in East Jerusalem.

Refugees

The issue of Palestinian refugee claims remains one of the most intractable in the peace process. For the Palestinians, the 'right of return' for refugees who fled Israel in the 1948 war, and their descendants, is a key demand. For the Israelis, an influx of up to five million Arabs would amount to the destruction of the Israel as a Jewish state, with the Jews reduced to a vulnerable minority in their own country.

Normally, refugee issues are temporary. A refugee crisis occurs, as a result of war, persecution or other upheaval leading to a humanitarian crisis. Over time, however, as refugees either return, or are resettled in a new location, the problem diminishes, and the refugees and their descendants are able to enjoy a normal life. It is important to understand why this has not happened in the case of the Palestinians, and why this issue has persisted for so long when other refugee populations which emerged at around the same time (India-Pakistan, the Sudeten Germans) have long since receded into history.

UNRWA, the UN body with responsibility for Palestinian refugees, explains its policy as follows:

“Palestine refugees are defined as “persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.

UNRWA services are available to all those living in its area of operations who meet this definition, who are registered with the Agency and who need assistance. The descendants of Palestine refugee males, including adopted children, are also eligible for registration. When the Agency began operations in 1950, it was responding to the needs of about 750,000 Palestine refugees. Today, some 5 million Palestine refugees are eligible for UNRWA services.”

<http://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees>

The first paragraph offers a definition of a refugee which is both sensible and in conformity with international law. The second, however, baldly contradicts that by turning ‘refugee’ into a hereditary status, so that 750,000 actual refugees (most of whom, more than 60 years later, are no longer alive) have turned into five million. Rather than trying to provide an answer for refugees through absorption into their host countries or resettlement, as has happened other conflicts, UNRWA, along with the Arab host states, has deliberately maintained the refugee status of Palestinian refugees and passed it on to their descendants.

Recognition of Jewish national rights in Israel

Israeli negotiators see the recognition by the Palestinians of Israel’s character as the nation state of the Jewish people as a key demand going to the heart of Israel’s legitimacy. It reflects the original aim of the UN partition resolution of 1947 of two states for two peoples.

However, the Palestinians argue that such recognition would undermine the status of Arab citizens of Israel. More ominously, they link the issue with that of the ‘refugees’, arguing that recognition of Israel’s Jewish character would undermine the right of return. The Palestinians argue further that such recognition is unnecessary, since recognition of Israel as a legitimate state is sufficient for peace.

Security

Because Israel is a tiny country (at its narrowest, the Green Line is only nine miles from the Mediterranean coast) it has insisted on the Palestinian state being demilitarised, and on maintaining an Israeli military presence along the Jordan River (the eastern border of the West Bank) in order to prevent infiltration of terrorists and weaponry. For the Palestinians, this amounts to a continuation of Israeli occupation, which they have strenuously opposed.

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