

TRY THIS IN GAZA: A 'TRIAL' PALESTINE;
HOW TO GIVE PEACE A FIGHTING CHANCE

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Gaza, that desolate strip of land along the coast between Israel and Egypt, is where the Intifada started; it is where Hamas is the strongest; it is where socioeconomic conditions are the bleakest; and it is that part of the occupied territories that most Israelis would like to be rid of. On a daily basis, Israelis and Palestinians continue to kill each other in Gaza.

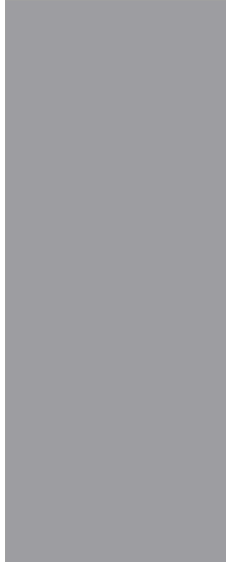
Yet the solution to the current impasse in Middle East negotiations may also lie in Gaza. By putting the final disposition of Gaza on the negotiating table, the Clinton administration could move both the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab conflicts a giant step closer to full resolution, giving rise to a new dynamic that could weather much political uncertainty.

When the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks resume, presumably in June, they will once again labor within the crippling framework of "phased negotiations." From the start, the Palestinians have objected to those restrictions that limit the current talks to negotiation of a five-year interim agreement, with real peace negotiations delayed until the third year of that interim period. In a recent meeting of the Israeli cabinet, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres essentially adopted the Palestinian position, arguing that Israel's interests also support a move to final status negotiations.

Arguing for the creation of a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation, Peres pointed out that the government of Yitzhak Rabin must recognize that several propitious factors may not endure: Neither King Hussein's health nor Jordan's stability can be taken for granted indefinitely; the Israeli right wing may at some time return to power; Israel's negotiating strength is greater today than it will be after several years of interim Palestinian self-rule. Prime Minister Rabin, however, was unmoved. He remains committed to the idea of a testing period of limited Palestinian self-rule.

Yet, emotionally, Israel is ready to do something decisive about Gaza. Rabin himself has expressed the wish that it would just disappear, and some members of his cabinet have called for unilateral withdrawal. For the Israelis the problem is two-fold. Is there a way to withdraw from Gaza that will still give Israel the benefits of a negotiated settlement, putting in place a government with which it can live in peace? And can that withdrawal be done in a way that does not promote increased violence in the West Bank?

For the Palestinians, the Gaza issue is also problematic. The PLO has long been committed to a policy of establishing a Palestinian state in any part of the occupied territories from which Israel withdraws. Yet Palestinians fear that if Gaza's final status is decoupled from that of the West Bank, then Israel might never withdraw from the West Bank. And they fear that the political socioeconomic challenges of a Palestinian state in Gaza may prove too difficult to surmount.



Neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians are going to put forward a Gaza-first proposal, and this is just as well. If it came from either side, it would only exacerbate the fears of the other party. It falls to the Clinton administration to come up with a proposal that can satisfy the concerns of all and that would be addressed not only to the negotiators, but to the Israeli and Palestinian publics as well. The key elements of such a Gaza first proposal are:

- Israel will in the near term withdraw completely from Gaza, allowing the Palestinians to establish a state, constitutionally committed to peace with Israel.
- This Palestinian state will have as its citizens not just Palestinians in Gaza but those in the West Bank and East Jerusalem as well, plus those in the diaspora to whom it extends citizenship. The first government will be elected by all Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The elections will be supervised by an outside party (e.g. the U.N., and United States).
- The Palestinian government will have two territorial dimensions: it will immediately exercise sovereign powers over Gaza, and it will administer autonomy in the West Bank for a five-year period. In addition, as the government of a new state, it will continue negotiations with Israel over the remaining interim and final status issues.
- The Palestinian state will be demilitarized, except for an internal police force operating in both the West Bank and Gaza. The government will assume responsibility for preventing violence against Israelis.
- The Palestinians will be free to pursue in final status negotiations their claim that East Jerusalem should be the capital of the Palestinian state, and in the interim to establish two provisional capitals, one for Gaza and one for the West Bank, joined by a high-speed rail linkage.
- The new government will also open negotiations with Jordan over possible confederation, an idea endorsed by the PLO and with appeal to both the United States and the Israeli government.
- The Palestinian state will be eligible for admission into the U.N. and will immediately exchange ambassadors with Israel, the United States and other countries.
- Israel will allow Palestinian laborers to continue to work in Israel but will reserve the right

- to seal its borders to prevent attacks on Israeli citizens.
- Settlers in Gaza will have the option of living under Palestinian sovereignty or returning to Israel.
 - The United States will commit itself to organizing an international development fund to provide substantial resources for economic development inside Gaza and the West Bank.

The five years of autonomy in the West Bank would be a test period allowing Israel to see what it is like to live alongside a Palestinian state. It would allow the Palestinians an opportunity to demonstrate both their commitment to a peaceful coexistence with Israel and their determination to establish a democratic society. Assuming that the Palestinian state met its commitments, after three years the final status negotiations would take up as its central issue the extension of Palestinian sovereignty to West Bank territory.



Were the United States to put such a proposal on the table, it would immediately transform the negotiations into true peace talks. The establishment of a Palestinian state and Israel's commitment to future negotiations over extending sovereignty would make it easier to negotiate temporary terms for Palestinian authority on the West Bank and to defer consideration of Jerusalem. This major advance for the Palestinians would also make it feasible for Egypt, Syria and Jordan to each provide Israel with a good measure of the so-called "warm peace" it seeks. The proposal would also allow Israel to overcome its conceptual opposition to Palestinian statehood, while giving it a opportunity to test the nature of such a state prior to facing the practical and emotional issues of Palestinian sovereignty in the West Bank.

For the Palestinians, the plan would immediately end their statelessness and produce new structures of political authority that would give the Palestinians the wherewithal to deal with the threat posed by the radical fundamentalist Hamas. With the establishment of a nation state, the Palestinian ethos would evolve from the norms of a nationalist movement, to the familiar imperatives of national interest. Energies would flow towards meeting the challenges of democratic development. And most importantly, this proposal would create a framework of incentives for peace passage through the interim stage and on to a lasting peace.

