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Israel's fated bleak future

By John J. Mearsheimer

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President Barack Obama has finally coaxed Israel and the Palestinians back to the negotiating table. He and most Americans hope that the talks will lead to the creation of a Palestinian state in Gaza and the West Bank. Regrettably, that is not going to happen. Instead, those territories are almost certain to be incorporated into a "Greater Israel," which will then be an apartheid state bearing a marked resemblance to white-ruled South Africa.

There are four possible futures regarding Israel and the occupied territories. The outcome that gets the most attention is the two-state solution, where a Palestinian state would control 95 percent or more of the West Bank and all of Gaza, and territorial swaps would compensate the Palestinians for those small pieces of the West Bank that Israel would keep. East Jerusalem would be its capital.

The alternatives to a two-state solution all involve creating a Greater Israel — an Israel that effectively controls Gaza and the West Bank. In the first scenario, it would become a democratic binational state in which Palestinians and Jews enjoy equal political rights. This solution would mean abandoning the original Zionist vision of a Jewish state, since Palestinians would eventually outnumber Jews.

Israel could also expel most of the Palestinians from Greater Israel, preserving its Jewish character through ethnic cleansing. Something similar happened in 1948, when the Zionists drove 700,000 Palestinians out of the territory that became Israel. The final alternative is some form of apartheid, whereby Israel increases its control over the occupied territories, but allows the Palestinians to exercise limited autonomy in a set of disconnected and economically crippled enclaves.

The two-state solution is the best of these alternatives, but most Israelis are opposed to making the sacrifices that would be necessary to create a viable Palestinian state. There are about 480,000 settlers in the occupied territories and an extensive infrastructure of connector and bypass roads, not to mention the settlements themselves. A Hebrew University Truman Institute poll in March of West Bank settlers found that 21 percent believe that "all means must be employed to resist the evacuation of most West Bank settlements, including the use of arms." They needn't worry, however, because Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is committed to expanding the settlements throughout the occupied territories.

Of course, there are prominent Israelis like former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert who do favor a two-state solution. But that does not mean that they would be willing or able to make the concessions necessary to create a legitimate Palestinian state. Olmert did not do so when he was prime minister, and it is unlikely that he or Livni could get enough of their fellow citizens to back a genuine two-state solution. The political center of gravity in Israel has shifted sharply to the right over the past decade, and there is no sizable pro-peace political party or movement they could turn to for help.

Some advocates of a two-state solution believe the Obama administration can compel Israel to accept a two-state outcome. The United States, after all, is the most powerful country in the world and should have great leverage over Israel, because it gives the Jewish state so much diplomatic and material support.

But no American president can pressure Israel to change its policies toward the Palestinians. The main reason is the Israel lobby, a powerful coalition of American Jews and Christian evangelicals that has a profound influence on U.S. Middle East policy. Alan Dershowitz was spot on when he said, "My generation of Jews ... became part of what is perhaps the most effective lobbying and fundraising effort in the history of democracy."

Consider that every American president since 1967 has opposed settlement building, yet none has been able to get Israel to stop building them. There is little evidence that Obama is different from his predecessors. Shortly after taking office, he demanded that Israel stop all settlement building in the occupied territories. Netanyahu refused and Obama caved in to him. The president recently made it clear that he wants Israel to stop building in East Jerusalem. In response, Netanyahu said that Israel would never stop building there, because it is an integral part of the Jewish state. Obama, under pressure from the lobby, has remained silent and certainly has not threatened to punish Israel.

The best Obama can hope for is to push forward the so-called peace process, but most people understand that these negotiations are a charade. The two sides will engage in endless talks while Israel continues to colonize Palestinian lands. The likely result, therefore, will be a Greater Israel between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

But who will live there and what kind of political system will it have?

It will not be a democratic binational state, at least not in the near future. The vast majority of Israel's Jews have no interest in living in a state dominated by Palestinians. Ethnic cleansing would guarantee that Greater Israel retains a Jewish majority, but that murderous strategy would do enormous damage to Israel's moral fabric, to its relationship with Jews in the Diaspora, and to its international standing. No genuine friend of Israel could support this crime against humanity.

The most likely outcome is that Greater Israel will become a full-fledged apartheid state. There are already separate laws, separate roads and separate housing in the occupied territories, and the Palestinians are essentially confined to impoverished enclaves. Indeed, two former Israeli prime ministers — Ehud Barak and Olmert — have made just this point. Olmert said that if the two-state solution collapses, Israel will face a "South African-style struggle." He went so far as to argue, "as soon as that happens, the state of Israel is finished."

Olmert is correct. A Jewish apartheid state is not sustainable over the long term. The discrimination and repression that underpin apartheid are antithetical to core Western values. How could anyone make a moral case for it in the United States, where democracy is venerated and segregation and racism are routinely

condemned? It is equally hard to imagine the United States having a "special relationship" with an apartheid state. It is much easier to imagine Americans strongly opposing that racist state's political system and working hard to change it. An apartheid Israel would also be a strategic liability for the United States.

This is why, in the end, Greater Israel will become a democratic binational state, whose politics will be dominated by its Palestinian citizens. This will mean the end of the Zionist dream.

What is truly remarkable about this situation is that the lobby is effectively helping Israel destroy its own future as a Jewish state. On top of that, there is an alternative outcome that would be relatively easy to achieve and is clearly in Israel's best interests: the two-state solution. It is hard to understand why Israel and its American supporters are not working overtime to create a viable Palestinian state and why instead they are moving full-speed ahead to build an apartheid state. It makes no sense from either a moral or a strategic perspective.

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