

The New York Times

January 11, 2001 Thursday Late Edition - Final

Section A; Column 2; Editorial Desk; Pg. 31

The Impossible Partition

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Drawing up a partition for peace is admittedly a tricky business, but it can work -- provided each party gives the other what it needs: sovereignty, security and a workable arrangement for building a state.

Although securing partitions in places like Bosnia and Kosovo is not easy, one can at least see on a map how such an arrangement could work. The question is, can President Clinton's recently offered partition plan bring peace to Israelis and Palestinians? Does the geography allow it?

It's hard to see how. Because of security needs, Israel cannot grant the Palestinians a truly independent state of their own. Without a viable state, however, the Palestinians will not agree to end the conflict.

American commentators have painted the Clinton plan as fairly generous to the Palestinians. After all, Palestinians would control roughly 95 percent of the West Bank and all of the Gaza Strip, including Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. Palestinians would also have some jurisdiction over important holy sites in Jerusalem. There is a nod to the notion that the Palestinian state would be contiguous and not a string of disconnected pieces of territory.

The truth, however, is that the Clinton plan would create a truncated Palestinian state with limited sovereignty. Under the plan, Israel can maintain a major presence in the West Bank (roughly 80 percent of Israeli settlements on the West Bank could remain in place). Moreover, the plan apparently envisions a Palestinian state divided into three cantons, each separated from the other by Israeli-controlled territory. In particular, the West Bank would effectively be divided in half by Jewish settlements and roads running from Jerusalem to the Jordan River Valley. The Gaza Strip and the West Bank are already geographically separated by Israeli territory.

Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem would become part of the Palestinian state, but two of these neighborhoods would be islands surrounded on all sides by Israeli territory -- outposts cut off from their homeland.

The Clinton plan lets Israel maintain military forces in the strategically important Jordan River Valley. This means Israel would control the eastern border of the Palestinian state. Israel says it might be willing to remove its forces after six years, but there is no guarantee that it would actually do so. And why would it? The strategic value of the Jordan Valley to Israel -- which is great -- will not diminish over time.

Moreover, the Palestinians would not be allowed to build a military that could defend them, and they would have to let the Israeli army move into their new state if Israel declared a "national state of emergency." This stricture has echoes of the infamous Platt Amendment of 1901, which gave the United States broad rights to intervene in Cuba but which poisoned Cuban-American relations for more than 30 years. Finally, Israel could hold ultimate control over the Palestinians' water supply and air space.

It is hard to imagine the Palestinians accepting such a state. Certainly no other nation in the world has such curtailed sovereignty. Even if the Clinton plan is accepted, the new state is sure to be a source of boundless anger.

The best chance for peace depends on Israel's conceding enough to allow a strong and coherent Palestinian state to emerge. This approach would mandate a contiguous Palestinian state that has the means to defend itself. Israel would also have to abandon most of its settlements and roads on the West Bank and remove its troops for good from the Jordan River Valley. In short, Israel would have to radically alter its vision of a Palestinian state.

Israel won't agree to such measures anytime soon. This is partly because Israeli settlers will resist being uprooted from their homes, and partly because religious Israelis assert a sacred right to control the West Bank. But the larger issue is Israeli security. Israel doesn't want a strong Palestinian state that might threaten Israel, either by itself or in an alliance with other Arab states.

One might argue that the Palestinians would have no beef with Israel if they had a legitimate state of their own. This is possible, but Israel can never be certain about future Palestinian intentions. Indeed, given the bitter conflicts of the past century and the fact that Palestinians widely believe that Israel was built on stolen Palestinian land, the Israelis have good reason to fear continued Palestinian revanchism against Israel. Therefore, common sense says that Israel should not let the Palestinians acquire the capability to settle old scores.

In sum, it is hard to see how the Palestinians could get a viable state that would not threaten Israel. Independence for the Palestinians and security for the Israelis are fundamentally incompatible.

By comparison, partitioning Bosnia and Kosovo is a much easier task (although neither would be easy). For example, if Serbia agreed to independence for Kosovo, the new state would not have the capability to threaten Serbia -- even if it became part of a greater Albania. Nor would it have serious claims on Serbian territory, except for the small parts

of Kosovo that Serbia might get in the partition deal.

In a Bosnian partition, the Muslims would get their own small state, while the Croat and Serb-dominated parts of Bosnia would likely become part of Croatia and Serbia respectively. The Croats and Serbs inside and outside of Bosnia would welcome this outcome, which would not detract from their security in any way. While the Muslims oppose partition (because they think they can dominate Bosnia's politics), they would probably be more secure in their own state than in a multi-ethnic Bosnia. They could build their own army to protect their state from attack, and their Serb and Croat neighbors would have less reason to attack them.

The key point is that unlike the Israelis, none of the actors in Bosnia and Kosovo are made less secure by a partition that creates viable states on both sides of the dividing lines.

One possible similarity between these cases is that all three would require some population transfers, which are sure to make partition less palatable. But even here, resistance in Israel to moving the settlers off the West Bank is likely to be greater than Serbian resistance to moving Serbs about Kosovo or Bosnia, or Croatian resistance to moving Croats about Bosnia to carve out a viable Muslim state.

President Clinton still hopes to pull off a peace accord. But it's hard to imagine that even an accord could bring about a permanent peace. Israel cannot be secure alongside a securely independent Palestinian state.