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What Cyprus, Bosnia and Kosovo can teach us

By Shlomo Avineri

There are good reasons to worry the current round of peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority will yield no real results - not only due to the weakness of both two governments, but especially because the two sides are so far apart in their basic positions on borders, settlements, Jerusalem and the refugees. This expected failure is arousing fears the violence will resume and the region as a whole might slip into a new cycle of hostilities.

The fear is understandable - but it is not justified. It is based on the assumption that there are only two options: peace or war. But that is not true.

Part of the difficulty of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict stems from its complexity. The conflict has a territorial dimension, of course, but it also has other components: It is waged between two national movements; it involves disputes over issues of sovereignty and legitimacy, as well as a clash of historical narratives; it is riddled with the occupation, terrorism, settlements and the future of refugees; and although it is not fundamentally a religious conflict, religious aspects intensify it. Furthermore, the conflict involves neighboring countries, and it also influences the relations between international powers.

In this sense, the conflict is not unique. All of its components, in different dosages, have appeared in several prominent conflicts of the last decades: Cyprus, Kosovo, Bosnia and Kashmir.

Like the Israeli-Palestinian problem, each of these conflicts has lasted decades and is rooted in historical events, sometimes events that took place centuries ago; and in each of these cases, all attempts to find a solution have failed. And still, the alternative is not the eruption of a new war.

In Cyprus there was an enormous international effort to come up with a solution (The Annan Plan), which the United Nations, the United States, Britain, Russia, the European Union and even Greece and Turkey all embraced. Because of the opposition of the Greek Cypriots, however, the plan was an utter failure.

A similar attempt was made in Kosovo, and a plan that received broad international support (The Ahtisaari Plan) led to Kosovo's independence. But the objection of the Serbs, supported by Russia, is preventing a consensual solution. In Bosnia the Dayton Accords did end the fighting, but the political apparatus created there, a complex multi-ethnic federation, is not functioning, and only the presence of foreign troops prevents the outbreak of renewed hostilities on ethnic grounds.

The Kashmir conflict is as far from resolution today as it was in 1947, when British India was divided into two independent states, India and Pakistan.

In all of these cases, the international community understood, reluctantly but out of a realism based on both theory and practice, that there was no immediate chance of resolving the crisis. And so it turned to other channels of gradual restraint - what is known in political jargon as "conflict management."

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is far more complex, but for some reason the international community believes it can offer a swift and immediate solution for it. Israel's internal debate also focuses on different proposals for resolving the conflict, and it does not try to confront the alternatives suggested by the lessons of other, similar situations.

Conflicts of this kind are hard to solve not only because of leadership issues: When there are such weighty issues at stake as clashing national narratives or deep feelings anchored in memories that are sometimes traumatic (just ask the Greeks in Cyprus what they think of the Turks), such obstacles cannot be removed in the blink of an eye.

We would do well to learn from these lessons and free ourselves of the provinciality that characterizes much internal Israeli debate. International bodies, which are not always aware of the necessary analogies, can also learn from the attempts elsewhere: Those who ask European leaders why they think they can succeed in the Middle East after having so clearly failed in Cyprus and Kosovo will see that they begin to think anew.

Changing the paradigm from "conflict resolution" to "conflict management" does not mean accepting the status quo. The recent initiative in Cyprus to open a crossing at Ledra Street in Nicosia offers evidence of this.

In our context, this means continuing to seek different ways of minimizing the friction between the two sides: real Palestinian steps toward creating governing institutions, particularly an effective security apparatus capable of dealing with militia and terrorist gangs; aid in economic development, which suits the interests of both sides; a significant easing of the roadblock burden and an end to new construction in the Jewish settlements; and, finally, once the political furor has subsided on our side, renewing the option of unilateral disengagement from specific parts of the West Bank.

Historic disputes are not resolved with a wave of the hand, much less by external directives (the U.S. has yet to "resolve" any one of them).

It takes lengthy internal processes, which alone can lead to the formation of a joint political desire to reach an agreement. Until then, the only options are not war or peace; there is always a third way - as Cyprus, Kosovo and Bosnia can prove.

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