

Precarious vision: The U.S. role in a Middle East solution

by [James L. Hecht](#) in the [November 15, 2005](#) issue

Israel's bloodless withdrawal from the Gaza Strip is the latest in a series of events which make a settlement between Israelis and Palestinians more possible than has been the case for a long time. The concept of a two-state solution has become widely accepted. Opinion surveys indicate that most Israelis and Palestinians long for peace and appear willing to make the concessions necessary for a settlement. Also, the Palestinians are fairly well united behind an able leader dedicated to a peaceful resolution.

The broad outlines of a mutually acceptable settlement are clear. It would involve an end to all Israeli military occupation of a Palestinian state, a state that would consist of Gaza and the West Bank. Boundaries would be adjusted, with Palestine agreeing to relinquish claims to areas annexed by Israel in 1967 in exchange for transfer to Palestine of an equivalent amount of Israeli territory. This is consistent with the Saudi proposal endorsed by all Arab countries and with what a significant group of Israeli and Palestinian leaders agreed to in the Geneva Accord.

The Geneva Accord was signed by 30 prominent Israelis and 22 Palestinians in November 2003. It gets into far more detail than the "road map" approved by the Israeli and Palestinian governments. The result of nearly two years of intensive talks initiated by the Swiss foreign minister, it deals with such contentious issues as the status of Jerusalem and of refugees, and, most important, it recognizes that an agreement on permanent borders between Israel and Palestine is necessary to avert unilateral actions undermining the viability of a two-state solution.

However, there have been times in the past when peace seemed attainable and then was thwarted. Acts of terrorism remain a major threat to peace. On the Israeli side are the right-wingers who believe that God gave Judea and Samaria to the Jews and that they are serving God by claiming those areas for a greater Israel. The Israeli government has the means of containing this element, but whether it will do

so depends on its assessment of the benefits and costs. Giving up the settlements in Gaza provides large benefits for relatively little cost. Giving up settlements in the West Bank will be far more costly financially and in security risks.

The radicals on the Palestinian side, those still unwilling to accept Israel as a Jewish state on lands that were overwhelmingly Palestinian until 1920, pose a greater problem because at present the Palestinian Authority is unable to prevent acts of terrorism. For that to happen, the Palestinian security service must be made equal to the task. That requires not only a great deal of training, which is being done to a certain extent by the United States and the European Union, but a willingness on the part of Israel to allow the security service to be well armed. That requirement runs into another huge barrier to peace: Israelis' deep concern about security and their reluctance to allow the Palestinians the equipment they need lest it be someday used against Israel.

Israelis' hypervigilance on security issues will not be overcome easily. History has instilled in Jews a sense of the danger of trusting their security to others. That history includes centuries of discrimination, ghastly pogroms, the necessity to fight four wars to preserve Israel as a country, and continuing terrorist attacks. And, of course, the Holocaust.

Jewish concern for security probably is at the root of another barrier to peace: the prime minister, Ariel Sharon. Yasir Arafat made a huge miscalculation in 2000 when he did not prevent the second intifada. He thought that rebellion would improve his bargaining position. The result, instead, was the election of Sharon, the leader voters thought would improve security even though it would mean decreasing the chance of a settlement with the Palestinians.

While Sharon now is being castigated by the ultra right-wingers for his pullout from Gaza, most experts think this move was made merely to consolidate Israeli control over much of the West Bank. Israelis continue to build settlements in the West Bank, and although Sharon claims to support a two-state solution, he has never endorsed such necessities as that Palestinian areas be contiguous and that a Palestinian state control its own roads.

Another barrier to peace is the precarious position of Mahmoud Abbas. His election as president of the Palestine Authority by a large majority reflected the great desire of Palestinians for peace with Israel and was rooted in the hope that he would be

able to negotiate a settlement that would improve the dismal existence of his people. However, if Abbas does not produce, his support will disintegrate and he will not be able to stop hostilities against Israelis.

One more barrier to peace, one not widely known except by experts on the region, is the issue of water. When Israel occupied the West Bank in 1967, it enforced stringent methods to monitor and control water, allocating only 15 percent to the Palestinians. As a result, 90 percent of the land cultivated by Jewish settlers is irrigated as opposed to only 3 percent of the land farmed by Palestinians. In addition, much of the West Bank water has been diverted to Israel, which has become dependent on this source for 30 percent of its water.

I doubt that these barriers can be overcome unless the U.S. takes a much more active role and is willing to invest large amounts of money to assist both sides. That is how the U.S. ended hostilities between Israel and both Egypt and Jordan. What can the U.S. do to support a peace process based on the outline of the Geneva Accord?

- Give as aid to Israel a significant part of the \$10 to \$25 billion needed to provide housing for settlers who would be forced to move back to Israel from the West Bank because their communities are not included within Israel's new borders.
- Help finance large desalination plants to alleviate a water crisis without requiring Israel to cut back on its highly subsidized agriculture.
- Pledge that in the unlikely case that Israel is attacked by another nation, the U.S. would consider it the same as an attack on America.
- Make large grants to the Palestinian government for building its infrastructure if it agrees to land swaps that would allow some of the large settlements close to the 1967 border to become part of Israel.
- Compensate Palestinian refugees in return for their agreement to give up the right to return to land their families once owned in what is now Israel.

The United States would not need to bear the entire cost of these subsidies for peace. If the U.S. provided leadership, the European Union, which already is providing significant aid to the Palestinians, would almost certainly increase its aid.

But even if the U.S. picked up the entire bill, it would be an excellent investment for the future.

While the perceived support by America of Israel's occupation of Palestine is not the only cause of terrorism by Muslim extremists, it is an important factor. Almost all experts agree that until there is a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, terrorism will continue for many years. And the cost of terrorism is not only blood and fear, but tens of billions of dollars for military and homeland security expenses.

Since Abbas has become president of the Palestinian Authority, he has done a magnificent job in articulating reasonable Palestinian positions—except one. He should add to his requests that the international community not only aid his people but also aid Israel. All those involved must recognize that to be pro-Palestinian also means to be pro-Israeli and to be pro-Israeli also means to be pro-Palestinian. The fate of the two nations is inexorably linked.