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Call It Israel-Palestine — Try Federal Solution in Middle East

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Swiss set good example for a new Palestine-Israel

By Andrew Reding

Israel needs the West Bank and Palestinians need Israel. Rather than a stand-alone Palestinian state, PNS Associate Editor Andrew Reding sees a federal structure — such as that found in Switzerland, Belgium and Canada — as a real solution for two warring peoples.

Israel's reoccupation of the West Bank exposes the fundamental weakness of the formula for Palestinian statehood born of the Oslo Accord.

As a stand-alone state, a Palestine devoid of water and other vital resources would be like an American Indian reservation or one of the "homelands" proposed by the former apartheid government of South Africa. It would have no hope of economic viability and thus of democratic stability.

By the same token, an Israel bordered by an unstable and hostile Palestine can never achieve security within its pre-1967 borders.

Whether they like it or not, Israel and Palestine need each other. Israel needs Palestine for its security and Palestine needs Israel for its economic viability. However far-fetched it may seem under present circumstances, that points to a federal solution as the only viable alternative to chronic conflict.

Belgium, Canada and Switzerland are possible models, and testaments to the power of federalism to overcome ethnic conflict. For two centuries, the French and Germans fought unimaginably barbarous wars against each other everywhere but in one federal republic: Switzerland.

In Switzerland, Germans, French and Italians have lived in peace — for two reasons. The country adopted a policy of strict neutrality in foreign affairs and decentralization in domestic affairs. Each of the country's 26 cantons is self-governing with the exception of such obvious federal tasks as managing the currency and foreign policy. German, French and Italian cantons manage their own affairs in their own languages. All contribute to national defense, with French, German and Italian soldiers serving side by side.

Canada has used federalism to resolve a French-English ethnic divide that not long ago threatened to tear the country in two. It has done so by allowing Quebec to develop virtually all of the features of statehood short of independence. The provincial legislature is now known as the National Assembly, and the Quebecois have succeeded in making the French language mandatory. Having attained their goals through self-government, they have been losing interest in independence.

Belgium is trying out a new federal structure to overcome ethnic antagonisms between its French-speaking and Dutch-speaking populations. The country has been divided into two roughly equal regions — Flanders and Wallonia. Each now has its own parliament. But Brussels, the capital, is in a third self-governing district, where both French and Dutch are official languages. The national parliament in Brussels continues to handle defense and foreign affairs.

That could be a model for a federated republic of Israel and Palestine. Israel and Palestine would each be internally self-governing, with the exception of defense, foreign affairs, the national treasury and economic policy. These would initially be in Israeli hands (the status quo), but would be transferred to a new federal parliament once it became clear the federal experiment was succeeding.

A federal constitution would contain a bill of rights protecting Israelis and Palestinians alike. Over time, Palestinians would be recruited into the current Israeli Self-Defense Forces, as is already the case with Israeli Arabs — gradually converting it into an integrated federal force like the Swiss, Belgian and Canadian armies.

Jerusalem would follow the example of Brussels. It would become the third entity in the federation — and its capital. Both Jewish West Jerusalem and Arab East Jerusalem would have their own democratically elected councils, much like the boroughs in New York City.

Jewish settlers would be free to remain where they are, subject to the lawful authority of the regional government, which would be bound to respect their constitutional rights. They would be protected, as would all citizens, by an integrated federal police.

The federal constitution would guarantee freedom of religion and separation of church and state. Though often referred to as a “Jewish state,” Israel is in fact a secular state with a large minority of Arab citizens, whose representatives sit alongside Jews in the governing Knesset. This provision would forestall the theocratic designs of both Jewish and Islamic extremists.

By linking Palestine to Israel in an economic union, such an arrangement would contribute to the growth of the Palestinian middle class, a development essential to combating corruption and extremism and fortifying democracy.

By integrating Palestinians into a common defense effort and by ensuring more defensible borders, it would also greatly reduce Israel’s vulnerability to attack from neighboring countries.

It would enable Israel to recover the moral ideals behind its creation in a way that would also enable Palestine to shine as a model of democratic prosperity to other Arab and Muslim peoples.

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