

Kosovo and Palestine

By Yossi Alpher,
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If the current Israeli-Palestinian peacenegotiations fail - at the time of writing they have been suspended by thePalestinian side in protest at Israel'smilitary response [1] to rocket fire from Gaza - the Palestinian leaders in Ramallahostensibly have three options:

- * they can launch a third *intifada* in the West Bank
- * they can petition the internationalcommunity to compel Israelto accept a single bi-national state solution
- * they can declare independence.

The last option was considered - and rejected- by Palestinian president, Yasser Arafat, during the more difficult stages ofthe Oslo peaceprocess. It has now been resurrected by Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO)executive committee member Yasser Abed Rabbo [4] and others. Their inspiration [5] is Kosovo. They advocate declaringindependence within the 4 June 1967 borders as a means of galvanising Arab andinternational support.

The differences between the Kosovo model and aPalestinian unilateral declaration of independence [6] are substantive. To take three of the mostobvious: first, the Ramallah-based Palestinian leadership does not control theGaza strip nor much of the West Bank, whereas the Kosovars controlled the entiretyof their territory with the help of an international force on the eve of independence;second, the Israeli leadership welcomes a two-state solution based on the 4 June1967 lines [7], whereas Serbia insists that Kosovo is partof that state; third, the PLO already declared independence once, in 1988, andenjoys diplomatic representation throughout the nations of the world, yet thebenefits of that act for the cause of a genuine Palestinian state have been limited.

Under these circumstances, a Palestinian moveto (again) declare independence is liable to be perceived widely as desperateand pathetic rather than heroic and triumphant. Yasser Abed Rabbo himself notes [8] that his embrace of the idea is largely anattempt to stimulate the current unproductive two-state negotiations and fendoff pressures by some of his fellow Palestinians to demand a bi-national statesolution.

YossiAlpher is co-editor ofthe bitterlemon [2]s family of internet publications. He is aformer director of the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University, and was a special adviser toformer Israeli prime minister, Ehud Barak.

Also by Yossi Alpher in **openDemocracy**:

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"Gaza's agency, Israel's choice [2]" (29 January 2008)

Nevertheless, the Kosovo declaration [8] of independence on 17 February 2008 raises three interesting and relevant issues for the Israeli-Palestinian case.

The first is the fact that, from the Serbian standpoint, this is an imposed solution. As Serbian foreign minister Vuk Jeremic warned [9] on 27 February 2008: "Recognising the unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence from Serbia legitimises the doctrine of imposing solutions for ethnic conflicts". Needless to say, it is Serbia's horrific behaviour toward the Kosovars over the years that led the west to impose this solution, while Israel has consistently avoided any similar situation in its conflict with the Palestinians. But there are Arabs, Israelis and others who insist that the only possible solution for our conflict is an imposed one, and they will draw encouragement from the Kosovo model.

The second relevant issue emerging from Kosovo is the role [10] of the European Union. In effect, the EU is trying to embrace both Kosovo and Serbia and highlight the huge benefits for each of solving this conflict within a European community context [11] that offers economic prosperity as well as a diminution of the significance of national borders and a downgrading of ethnic conflicts. Here, too, there are Arabs and Israelis who see the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a similar European context. They note that, despite its difficulties with Turkey [11], the EU is anxious to absorb Muslim Kosovo, thereby accelerating the precedent for membership by additional non-Christian countries.

Under present circumstances, an EU solution [11] for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict appears far-fetched. But the notion of a regional solution has already been embraced by the Arab League in the form of the Arab peace initiative. Hopefully the league, where voices have recently been raised threatening cancellation of the initiative, will now draw encouragement from the Kosovo model and more actively pursue its plan.

The third issue is that the Kosovo drama is not over. The partition [11] borders imposed on Serbia are untenable for that country largely because of the historical memory of the battle lost in Kosovo [12] by the Serbs to the Ottomans in 1389. The presence in Kosovo of a large Serbian population that borders on Serbia, and of other communities throughout the territory, is significant here. While the Serbs and Kosovars refused to discuss partition of Kosovo to accommodate the Serbian national narrative prior to Kosovo's independence, doing so now might be a way to end the standoff created by that act.

In other words, an imposed solution that leaves one of the parties as desperate as the Serbs may be only a prelude to additional negotiations and compromises. This is a message that resonates with Israelis and Palestinians.

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