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EDITORIALS

A plan for Palestinians

THE MARVEL of the Arc is not its symmetry, though it would sweep grandly from the Palestinian city of Jenin in the northern West Bank over hills and past villages to the southern cities of Hebron and Gaza. The beauty of this proposed transit line that would connect major cities is its ability to convey a Palestinian state. Envisioning a high-speed train with stations along a major north-south arc along the West Bank and the Gaza Strip transforms the ideological construct of a Palestinian state into a plausible, geographic reality.

The proposed Arc is a highlight of a two-volume Rand Corp. report that assumes a Palestinian state is in the offing and recommends ways to build a successful one. Its vision supercedes the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - the killing violence, the disputed borders, the unrealized peace deals - and lays out the necessities for a viable Palestinian state, including a \$33 billion price tag over 10 years.

For some, that assumption may be reason to dismiss the report. But the Rand study should be an incentive to look beyond the status quo. It gives Palestinians practical solutions to what often appear as roadblocks, such as how to create a contiguous state from disparate quadrants of land. A high-speed transit corridor would make the connections that seem impossible today. Complemented by a toll road, aqueduct and fiber optic cable, the rail line would spur development along the route, which would mean jobs and self sufficiency for Palestinians, whose gross domestic product is about \$800 a year, according to the study's authors.

The Rand analysts recognize the need for open borders, security and -- more important -- a credible government to plan and manage the future of a Palestinian state. It projects a \$6 billion cost for the Arc infrastructure, a fraction of U.S. expenses in Iraq and twice America's annual contribution to Israel.

The study argues that promoters of a Palestinian state should be planning for it now. A core of Palestinian society -- academics, urban planners, business people -- should accept the Rand challenge. Israeli supporters of a two-state solution could lend their expertise. In fact, Israeli media reported this week that the Sharon government has proposed a rail link between Gaza and the West Bank in anticipation of the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

The hurdles of negotiating a peaceful settlement between Israel and Palestinians can't be underestimated. But the Rand report provides Palestinians with a blueprint that could complement any peace deal. A Palestinian state in the making -- even one on paper -- could help the leaders of a nascent state avoid the mistakes of a fledgling government.