

THE CASE FOR THE ONE-STATE SOLUTION

With the two-state solution on life support, it's time to revisit solutions once discarded as radical—namely, the one-state option

By Abdel Monem Said Aly

If a two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is unreachable, it is time to consider alternatives. The one-state option seems to be the frontrunner, competing only with the continuation of the untenable status quo. The idea is already on the table in Arab and Israeli circles, and open to debate. Today it appears as the only workable alternative to the two-state solution, which has prevailed since the partition resolution of 1947. There is no sign of an implementation of the two-state solution on the horizon, and if it were attempted, it would resemble a surgical operation with a great deal of blood loss.

While there are voices on both sides—Israeli and Palestinian—that continue to argue for a single state from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean, under either Israeli or Palestinian control, their claims are unrealistic. They cannot account for what would happen to the population of the other side. Reality has given rise to the idea of a single state for both the Palestinian and the Israeli peoples. According to opinion polls, there is a minority on both sides that supports this idea. Most are young people who hope to see a solution in some foreseeable future and avoid the years of conflict their parents and grandparents lived through.

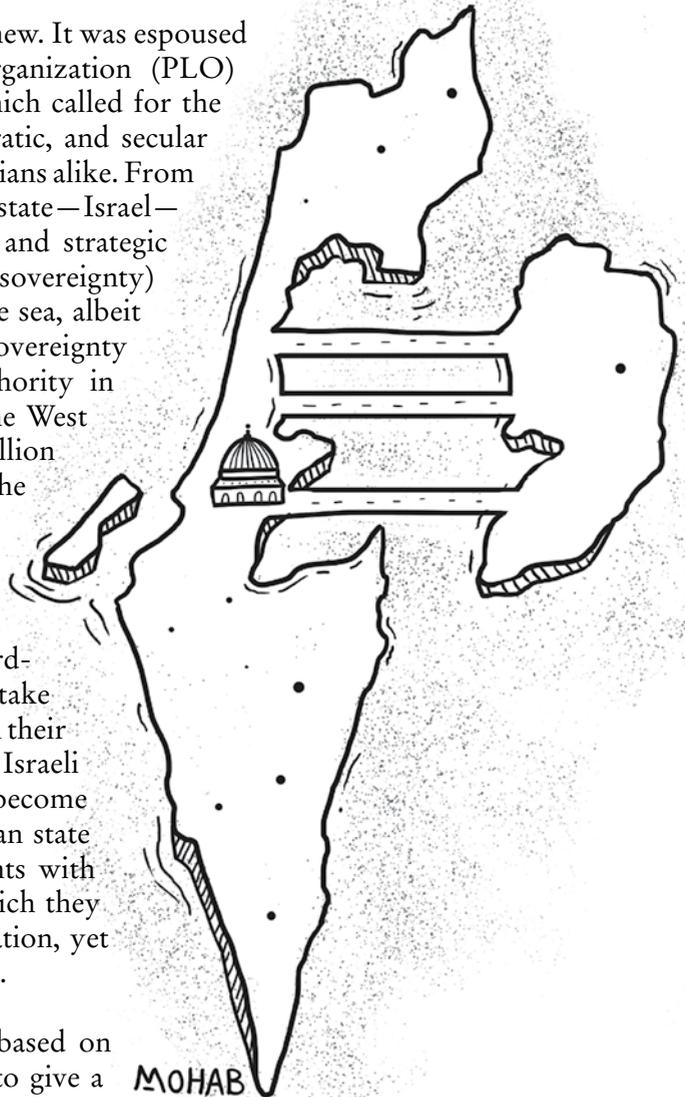
History of an Idea

For seven decades, the equations of the Arab–Israeli conflict have revolved around two variables: the creation of realities on the ground and political, diplomatic, and military prowess. The result was the establishment of the state of Israel, its expansion beyond the borders set by the 1947 UN partition resolution, and its subsequent expansion after the 1967 war to an empire extending from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean and from Quneitra in Syria to Qantara east of the Suez Canal in Egypt. The Arabs only began to tip the scales in their favor after the 1973 October War, with the Israelis ultimately withdrawing from the Sinai Peninsula and parts of Jordan and the Syrian Golan.

Meanwhile, the Palestinians have remained unable to realize their dream of an independent state. They have achieved a “national authority” on Palestinian land, but that authority is weak and limited in its power and capacity. Also, while Israel has succeeded in enticing back a considerable portion of the Jewish diaspora, evolving into a technologically and militarily advanced country with worldwide influence, and retaining the ability to expand its settlements in the Occupied Territories, the conflict has not only hampered Arab progress and development, but has also generated extremist trends that are incompatible with both the Palestinian national movement and the world abroad. Hamas rule is a far cry from what the founders of the Palestinian independence movement had in mind. Still, after seventy years, six million Palestinians hold their ground on the land of Palestine.

The notion of a single state is not new. It was espoused by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in its original charter in 1964, which called for the establishment of a single, democratic, and secular state for Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike. From a practical standpoint, a single state—Israel—already exists, enjoying security, and strategic and economic control (in short, sovereignty) over the land from the river to the sea, albeit with some codified concession of sovereignty to the Palestinian National Authority in Gaza and in Areas A and B in the West Bank. Meanwhile, there are 1.6 million Palestinians, the descendants of the 150,000 who remained after the Nakba, who live in the state and hold Israeli citizenship. With thirteen ministers of parliament, the Palestinians make up the third-largest bloc in the Knesset and take part in crafting Israeli policies from their position in the opposition. The Israeli Arabs, as they are called, refuse to become part of any independent Palestinian state and prefer to fight for equal rights with the Jews in the Israeli state in which they compose 21 percent of the population, yet are treated as second-class citizens.

In this context, a new initiative based on an old idea has emerged, aiming to give a



full and complete voice to the one-state solution. On March 1, 2018, the One State Foundation was launched, a Palestinian–Israeli initiative with an agenda to broaden debate and ultimately gain support for a one-state solution. It holds,

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first, that the current situation in Palestine and Israel is untenable; second, that the negotiating process that emanated from the Madrid Peace Conference and Oslo Accords on the basis of a two-state solution has reached a dead end as the final status issues degraded to become effectively non-negotiable; third, that this obstructs the realization of the hopes and aspirations of the Palestinian and Israeli

peoples; fourth, that the time has come to rethink the question in its entirety; and, fifth, that any new thinking has to reflect realities on the ground and, above all, the reality that more than fifty years after the Israeli occupation of the whole of Palestine, a form of unity over political, economic, and security matters already exists.

Considerable literature has also been published, by both Israelis and Palestinians, calling for a one-state proposition. Saeb Erekat, the former chief Palestinian negotiator, has suggested that the one-state option might be a workable alternative if the two-state solution fails. In an article appearing in the *New Yorker* in August 2017, with the headline, “The End of This Road: The Decline of the Palestinian National Movement,” Hussein Agha and Ahmad Khalidi posit two central ideas. First, the Palestinian national movement borne on the shoulders of Yasser Arafat, Fatah, and the PLO has faded and there is no one to take their place. Second, despite their mournful situation, Israel’s Palestinian citizens, who have demonstrated an ability to learn from and interact with Israeli political realities, may now be in a position to present a new direction for Palestinian nationalism that could constitute a “remarkable transformation” in its political nature.

Even the Israeli strategic analyst Yossi Alpher, who does not agree with the one-state option, noted in an article for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: “By 2017, Israel and Palestine were slowly sliding down a slippery slope towards a single political entity.” Likewise, Joel Koven’s *Overcoming Zionism: Creating a Single Democratic State in Israel/Palestine* approaches the subject from an Israeli perspective, arguing that the ongoing occupation in Palestine strips Zionism of its ideological “exceptionalism.” Meanwhile, the Crown Center for Middle East Studies published in 2016 a brief by Israeli scholar Shai Feldman and Palestinian scholar Khalil Shikaki titled “Israel and the Palestinians: Sliding toward a One State Reality.”

Today, the final status issues of the two-state solution—borders, Jerusalem,

refugees, settlements, and natural resources—have been determined on the ground by Israel alone or with the help of the United States. These were the main subjects left for final stage negotiations by the Oslo Accords, and expected to determine the implementation of the grand Israeli–Palestinian peace. Almost twenty-five years later, these issues are not yet resolved; on the contrary, they have killed the possibility of a two-state solution and paved the road instead for the one-state solution. The Donald Trump administration’s decision to move the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and declare it the unified capital of the Israeli state encouraged thirty-two countries to attend the celebration of the American move and promise to do the same. Although the American decision did not foreclose the possibility of further negotiations on the subject, the reality on the ground, even in East Jerusalem, does not allow two capitals for two states. Furthermore, Israeli encroachments on the Palestinian territories in the West Bank have not only made the resolution of borders and settlements impossible but also cemented linkages between Palestinian and Israeli territories.

Meanwhile, the United States’ recent decision to cut off aid to the United Nations Relief Works Agency has weakened the only international organization that can account for the scope and size of the Palestinian refugee issue, making negotiations on the subject more difficult than ever before. In practical terms, Israel has also put all natural resources, particularly water, under its own control. Importantly, Israeli technological advancements in the area of water desalination will likely provide the solution to water scarcity for both Palestinians and Israelis.

Growing Interdependence

The long years of occupation have created a range of interactions between Palestinians and Israelis that has generated an intensive interdependency. In addition to close security cooperation between the Palestinian Authority and Israel, a market for labor and other economic activities has resulted from the encroachment of 500,000 Jewish settlers into the Palestinian territories as well as the ongoing Judaification of Jerusalem. In short, there are twelve million people, half of whom are Palestinians and the other half Jews, who have been interacting for the past seven decades on this small stretch of land, in war and peace, in dispute and collaboration. In spite of the animosity, there is a kind of mutual dependency that cannot be ignored. In that space, the shekel is the primary currency of trade and commerce.

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The territories share a common taxation and customs system, and some 150,000 Palestinians commute to work in Israel every day. With time these new linkages have become incontrovertible.

The emergence of a joint Palestinian–Israeli list for October 2018 municipal elections in Jerusalem, though it did not succeed, points the way to a new strategy for ending the conflict. The Yerushalayim–Al Quds list (so-called for both the Hebrew and Arabic names of the city) was founded by Palestinian rights activist Aziz Abu Sarah, and veteran Jewish peace activist Gershon Baskin. It was to be made up of equal numbers of Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs and equal numbers of men and women, headed by Abu Sarah. The members of this diverse group of people share the belief that Jerusalem is a city of diversity and that it is essential to respect the rights and needs of all its inhabitants.

The Durable Opposition

Palestinians who oppose the idea of a one-state solution argue that a state based on full and equal citizenship between Arabs and Jews could never really exist and that a single state for both would merely be an extension of the current one in which, after seven decades, Israeli Arabs remain second-class citizens. The Palestinians have long resisted the Israeli concept of the single state, which in the current de facto version translates into occupation with apartheid. Israeli opponents, who are more numerous, hold that the Zionist project was and remains the establishment of a state with a Jewish majority—something that could not be sustained given current Palestinian population growth rates, which would reduce Jewish Israelis in the future to a minority status.

There are other objections. Some believe that the two-state solution is still possible if new ideas and compromises are applied. Others hold that the status quo serves Israel's purposes perfectly. It gives Israel the opportunity to create new realities on the ground that will guarantee its permanent superiority, especially given the collapse of major Arab powers such as Iraq and Syria, the chronic Palestinian rift, and developments in the international order that have generated closer relations between Israel and Russia, China, and India while Israeli relations with the United States have soared to unprecedented heights of collaboration.

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with the belief that time and power balances will eventually work toward this or that side's favor. The Palestinians, who have grown even more attached to their land because circumstances abroad are forbidding, or migration impossible, believe demographics are in their favor. In spite of the many obstacles, they also feel that they are part of a vast Arab sphere opposed to Israel that will eventually awaken and grow strong. The Israelis, for their part, are proud of what they have achieved since the establishment of the Israeli state and its success in taking

in diaspora Jews. They see their advantages in their technological advancement, their numerous Western ties, and an influence that makes U.S. presidents and presidential candidates strive to outdo one another to prove their loyalty and love for Israel. The feeling that another day of conflict will ultimately bring victory continues to prevail on both sides.

The Status Quo No Longer Holds

Still, the many objections do not diminish the fact that the status quo and ongoing occupation create a volatile situation with all the conditions for uprisings, resistance, and at times full-scale war. If the two-state alternative to the status quo is unavailable or impossible, then the one-state alternative could be laid out with solutions for the various objectors on both sides. For example, the majority/minority question could be dealt with by means of constitutional weights that would render vital matters subject to a minority veto, a two-thirds majority vote, or some combination thereof. Consociational democracy in which power is shared between both groups can create a framework that permits all ethnic and religious groups to exercise their rights and participate in the state.

If such a solution to a hundred-year long conflict appears idealistic, overly optimistic and, moreover, incompatible with the current balance of power, especially as there is no one in the Israeli political elite prepared to discuss the subject, there remains the possibility of a confederal solution. This would give each side its state but would also allow for a single capital for both in Jerusalem—perhaps the path to a single state of a new sort. This would ensure that the Palestinians in Israel and Israeli settlers in the West Bank could act with respect to their own political concerns, within a single economic and security framework that meets both of their needs. Meanwhile, the majority in Israel is ensured for the Israelis, and the same applies to the Palestinians in the state of Palestine. In sum, it is a kind of partition into two political entities, but in the framework of a broader state realm that guarantees security and prosperity to both peoples. In an article for the *Jerusalem Post* titled “Encountering Peace: Economic Union,” Baskin goes back to the original partition resolution of 1947 to find the UN plan that formally created the basis for the two-state solution: UN Resolution 181, November 29, 1947, officially termed Plan of Partition with Economic Union. “In Article D of the resolution,” he writes, “detailed steps were proposed to implement the unification and harmonization of the economies of the Jewish and Arab communities living between the river and the sea. Some of the specific details of that plan are quite interesting and still relevant.”

While confederation reflects the existing realities of interdependence between the two sides, it also resolves the citizenship crux of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The Israelis would always have majority status in their own state and

its security. Palestinians would have their state with a legitimate place in the Council of Jerusalem, which would be the capital of the confederation. Both the Israeli and Palestinian states would be in a position to interact with their Arab neighbors without animosity for Israel or dependency for the Palestinians. Both would have all symbols of the state from the flag to the seat in the UN, and above all their chosen identities along with the privileges of peace and space throughout historic Palestine.

Regionally speaking, the latest interactions between Egypt, Jordan, the Gulf countries, and Israel in the fields of oil, gas, pipelines, and sports, as well as

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direct and indirect political contacts, create the right environment for the confederate proposition to be considered. Meanwhile the American project to establish the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) comprised of the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries plus Egypt and Jordan aims not only to face a resurgent Iran and stabilize the region, but also to reach an Arab–Israeli peace in which the Palestinian–Israeli issues would top the agenda.

In Search of a Different Future

In spite of both Palestinian and Israeli rejections of extreme forms of a single state, an awareness of mutual dependency in security affairs and a single economic market is growing, giving force to a movement among both Palestinians and Israelis who feel that the one-state option is better than the moribund political process. This effort will require more deliberation and study, which takes as its starting point the recognition of an unacceptable status quo.

If this movement toward a one-state solution does not signify that the idea has taken root and spread, it does indicate that the idea has gone beyond the phase of opinion polls or uncommitted acknowledgment of new developments on the ground on the part of politicians or strategic thinkers. This growing acceptance involves bringing the idea of the one-state option into the public space in a systematic way and taking it beyond its primary environment among liberal Jewish communities abroad (in the United States and the Netherlands) and some few Palestinian communities inside Israel.

Israeli Arabs are an important component of this phenomenon. They are the ones who held out against the odds inside Israel, who actively engaged in Israeli political processes, and who reject and refuse to be part of a two-state solution in which they could become victims of territorial and/or population exchanges. The idea is still, however, in its organizational infancy and the obstacles ahead

are enormous. The majority opinion on both the Palestinian and Israeli sides opposes it and fears a move toward a single state that would not occur on a basis of reasonable military or political parity. Majority and minority opinions aside, a vast industry has emerged around politicians, writers, analysts, and opinion makers whose livelihoods have derived from the two-state solution and its complexities for the past quarter of a century. This group extends beyond Palestine and Israel to the international community and its venerable organizations, committees, and experts. To them it makes no difference how often the two-state solution receives a death sentence.

These rejectionist attitudes remain part and parcel of the Arab–Israeli conflict. Not only do they resist the realities that have given rise to a need for mutual coexistence, they also resist the hopes of younger generations who aspire to a better future. Most likely, these younger generations will form the space in which the one-state option may develop at a time when the conflict is ongoing and frequently bloody.

Today, the foremost item on the regional discussion agenda is the new diplomatic round to resolve the Arab–Israeli conflict by means of Trump’s “Deal of the Century.” Despite the emphasis again on the two-state solution, Trump frequently refers to the one-state option as being possible if the two parties can agree to it.

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Both the Israelis and Palestinians, each in their own way, have to contend with a reality that has been in violent upheaval over the past few years due to the Arab Spring, Islamist radicalism, civil wars, and Iranian and Turkish expansionism. Both sides will have to contend with the future repercussions of what is taking place in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Looking forward requires a re-examination of established political and diplomatic conventions in the region. There is a political, economic, and security sphere that brings Palestinians and Israelis together. That sphere is not a subject of agreement among the Palestinians and Arabs, in general, or among the Israelis. Yet, it is there and it is growing deeper. It even coexists with the realities of enmity, mutual rejection and fear of possible violence, and the outbreak of war.

A new reality has taken root in the wake of the second Palestinian Intifada, rabid Israeli settlement expansion, three Gaza wars, and the Palestinian Authority’s attempt to force the creation of a Palestinian state through the UN and international community. What is being created is a unified space that exists in spite of overwhelming divisions. This new reality demands new ways of thinking. ©