

# U.S. Policy and the Single State in Palestine/Israel

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Washington may never know that its own policies, subsumed under the misleading title “peace process,” might someday prove a key contributory agent to the creation of a single state in pre-1948 Palestine. U.S. accommodation of Israeli settlement policies and creeping annexation over several decades has created facts and conditions that could initially make a binational, multi-ethnic state (hopefully leading to a secular democracy) the only viable resolution, should apartheid and ethnic cleansing be deemed improper options in the 21st century.

Over the past few decades, Israel and the United States have pursued policies that dealt a crippling blow to the two-state solution, despite recent lip service to the concept of an independent Palestinian state. The derailment of the two-state solution was accomplished through the accumulated effect of wasted diplomatic efforts carried out by numerous U.S. presidents, from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush. We will look at two recent developments, the Oslo accords (1993–2001) and the Sharon/Bush “war on terror” (2001–2005), which led to Bush’s unreserved support for Ariel Sharon’s “disengagement” plan, and examine their impact on the prospects for a two-state solution. Between the signing of the Oslo accords in 1993 and the present, the two strategic allies have succeeded in creating their own rules of diplomatic engagement, leading up to the removal of the Palestinians from the negotiating table. Meanwhile, President Bush’s recent utterances, declaring the settlements “facts on the ground,” have rendered his vision of a sovereign, contiguous Palestinian state a mere rhetorical exercise.

This essay will argue that the Oslo

process sealed the fate of Palestinian statehood and that the subsequent “war on terror” made it possible for Bush to grant Sharon a new Balfour Declaration in April 2004, ironically rendering the vision of a single state for two equal communities the only dignified solution. Such diplomatic manoeuvres, carried out under the guise of a peace process, have unwittingly left an eventual pluralist existence in pre-1948 Palestine as the only viable alternative to perpetual conflict.

## **Oslo and the Demise of the Two-State Solution**

The Oslo accords dealt a crippling blow to the foundations of the global consensus that defined the prerequisites for a just and durable peace in the Middle East during the 1970s and 1980s: that peace was predicated on the right of the Palestinian people to establish their own independent state alongside Israel. That consensus and UN Resolution 242 were buried beneath the rubble of Oslo. We saw one worthless agreement after another—from Oslo I to Oslo II, from Cairo I to Cairo II, from Early Empowerment to the disempowerment of the Hebron Agreement, to the 1998 Wye River memorandum, to the Sharm al-Shaykh agreement, culminating in the unilateral disengagement from Gaza in August 2005, which was, in effect, a disengagement from the “peace process” itself.<sup>1</sup>

These agreements to reach agreement had, in reality, enabled Israel to conquer territory, to oppress, displace, and dispossess, without being held accountable. Thousands of dunams of land were confiscated and thousands of Palestinians were dispossessed after the Oslo signing, while the built-in gridlock

continued unabated. Thus, the letter of Oslo rendered the goal of Palestinian statehood impractical; yet the Palestinian dream continued to hang hopelessly on the Oslo spirit.

Paradoxically, the Oslo process led to an inevitable conclusion that its own architects had neither envisaged, nor contemplated, nor pursued: The future struggle is towards integration, not separation; towards a pluralistic existence, not exclusion; towards parity, mutuality, common humanity, and a common destiny. Ironically, this reality might lay the foundations for a joint Palestinian–Israeli struggle, emanating from a realization that the lives of Palestinians and Israelis are inextricably intertwined. There was and remains a common interest in the economy, employment, water distribution, ecology, energy, human rights, and foreign relations. To date, however, readiness to translate that commonality into a structural framework that would enable both people to derive equal benefits remains a distant dream.

Even if the dilapidated Oslo process had miraculously led to some kind of a breakthrough, the maximum gain for the Palestinians that seemed possible at the Camp David summit in 2000 would have been a fractured collection of Bantustans, non-contiguous enclaves, on about 40 % to 50 % of the West Bank. Under optimal conditions, something called the state of Palestine might have emerged, but it would have been only nominally independent. Genuine independence had already been ruled out by the agreement between Labor and Likud in January 1997. Entitled “National Agreement Regarding the Negotiations on the Permanent Settlement with the Palestinians,” it rejected Palestinian sovereignty, removing the Israeli settlement blocs, negotiating the status of Jerusalem, repatriating the refugees, and dismantling the occupation.

Beginning with Oslo II (1995), the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza began to realize that they are residents of enclaves “separated” from each other and from Israel but, functionally, indeed part of a “greater

Israel”. They are separated from the settlements, from Jerusalem, and from each other—cut off from other Palestinian cities and even villages, as well as from the Palestinian diaspora. On his way to the Camp David summit on 11 July 2000, Prime Minister Ehud Barak reaffirmed the concept of separation (the equivalent of *apartheid* in Afrikaans): “Separation—we here and they there ...” (*Yediot Ahronot*, 11 July, 2000).

### The Threat of Peace

Thirty-eight years after the occupation, 12 years after Oslo, five years after the Mitchell Report, five years after Taba, three years after the Zinni mission, and three years after the Road Map, peace remains hopelessly elusive. Why does peace present such a threat for Prime Minister Sharon and the Zionist establishment?

The pre-Oslo as well as the Oslo assumptions of a territorial settlement are clearly untenable for Sharon, who has been engaged, during his last three years in power, in implementing his 1981 plan: to annex half of the West Bank (22 % of the original pre-1948 Palestine) and restrict the Palestinians to limited autonomy in fragmented entities, in order to ensure that the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea will never accommodate more than a single sovereign state, Israel. Under that arrangement, 8 % of Mandatory Palestine would be the total of the fragments returned to the Palestinians for their “sovereign state.” Sharon was able to convince President Bush that his unilateral plan for Gaza is the cornerstone of a new diplomatic settlement. It was presented to the Palestinians and foisted on them on a “take-it-or-leave-it” basis.

For Sharon, the danger of a permanent peace emanates from a perceived “demographic threat.” Sometime between 2005 and 2010, Palestinian Arabs living under Israeli control will become a majority between the Jordan and the Mediterranean for the first time since 1948. At present, the number of Palestinians living between the river and the

sea under Israeli control is approximately 4.8 million, compared to 5.1 million Israelis. Short of giving the Palestinians equal rights in one state, Israel is left with three options: acquiescing in the establishment of a separate sovereign Palestinian state; expelling much of the Palestinian population; or keeping them confined in apartheid-style cantons, which, in essence, is Sharon's plan of 1981. Sharon hopes to overcome his demographic concerns and keep a simple conflict about ending a military occupation away not only from the global agenda, but even from that of his U.S. ally, where electoral and strategic concerns supersede the commitment to peace.

#### **A New Balfour Declaration by George W. Bush**

The 14 April 2004 exchange of statements and the subsequent joint press conference of President Bush and Prime Minister Sharon created an upheaval in the Palestine question, the likes of which has not been witnessed since the 1917 Balfour Declaration (see White House 2004). Bush's scripted statement, his letter of assurance, and his unrehearsed answers to the media during the joint White House appearance released Israel from its legal and moral obligations to the Palestinian people and to the requirements of international law. The implied exclusion of any sovereign and contiguous existence for the Palestinians in the West Bank, together with the abrogation of the rights of refugees to return to their homes, is bound to make the unitary solution a likely path in the long term.

Sharon has completed redeployment (not withdrawal) from an unwanted, overpopulated, poverty-stricken swath of land in return for U.S. acquiescence in a long-term interim agreement that would consolidate and make permanent Israel's control over the West Bank. From Sharon's vantage point, the current deal provides him with strategic gains without his having to negotiate with the Palestinians, which would inevitably require

some concessions on Israel's part. Meanwhile, by rendering the 1949 ceasefire lines obsolete while maintaining deliberate silence on the 1967 borders, the U.S. president has, in effect, recognized a permanent Israeli occupation of the remaining 22 % of what Israel did not conquer in 1948. Although the United States has, paradoxically, played the role of mediator while acting as Israel's chief diplomatic backer, banker, and arms supplier, it has nevertheless refrained from conceding publicly that Israel is under no obligation to withdraw from occupied territory. Now the window-dressing has been abandoned; Bush has come out of the closet, and de facto Israeli annexation of much of the West Bank is certain to follow.

Again, the United States has adhered to what has become accepted practice over the past few decades. Israel provides the framework, just as it did in 1978 (Camp David) and in 1993 (Oslo), while the United States signs off on the plan. Not only did Sharon sell Bush a recycled version of his 1981 plan to keep at least 50 % of the West Bank, relegating the Palestinians to three fragmented entities (Jenin and Nablus in the north, Ramallah in the centre, and Hebron/Bethlehem in the south), he also guaranteed U.S. acceptance based on the prevailing strategic realities in the region and domestic political realities in the United States.

In another blatant departure from the *declared* U.S. policy, Oslo's designation of a "final status" was summarily dismissed as Bush proceeded to pre-empt and foreclose on the issues falling under that status. America's frequently used phrase cautioning against "prejudging" a final settlement evaporated like dust, with Bush's instincts fixated on his electoral prospects and his "war on terror." As long as he himself did the prejudging, there seemed to be no need for accounting.

In conceding final-status issues, such as boundaries, refugees, settlements, Jerusalem, Bush seemed either incognizant of or oblivious to what his predecessors had offered on the table of negotiations at Camp David I,

Camp David II, and Taba, or in Bill Clinton's January 2001 speech in New York, delivered largely to an American Jewish audience. The proposals then posited for Israeli territorial acquisitions to accommodate Israel's settlers entailed a swap, whereby Israel was under obligation to cede "comparable" land to the Palestine Authority. Bush's "generous offer" takes no account of such reciprocal arrangements and bestows land upon Israel that is neither his nor Sharon's. Nor did Bush utter a single sentence about Israel's apartheid wall, which he had previously considered an obstacle to the peace process. Perhaps he was satisfied with Sharon's bogus assurance that the 400-mile wall was "temporary ... and, therefore will not prejudice any final status issues including borders" (Bush 2004).

Remarkably, Bush's new policy gave the Road Map short shrift, despite the hollow reference, and despite the huge diplomatic capital invested in it over more than a year. Sadly, however, and despite previous opposition, the Quartet joined the United States and Israel in June 2005 in endorsing Sharon's "disengagement plan." In fact, the Gaza redeployment and the wide media coverage it received have enabled Israel to "regain the peace and moral initiative, perversely putting pressure on the Palestinians to make a concession to the Israelis in response" (Falk 2005).

The 14 April charade was the inevitable consequence of a U.S. policy that has permitted Israel, over the past decades, to create facts on the ground while waiting for propitious regional and international circumstances to legitimize them. The collapse of the Soviet empire, together with Arab disarray, and the ascendancy of Washington's neo-conservatives, who exploited the events of September 11, were the exact circumstances that Israel had been waiting for to reap the harvest. It found another James Arthur Balfour in George W. Bush, whose abandonment of the so-called peace process could paradoxically re-ignite the search for different and more creative solutions.

### The Discourse of the Single State

By 2000, a new discourse was already developing about a broader social and economic struggle for equal rights, equal citizenship, and equal legitimacy within a single Israeli-Palestinian polity. Different versions, either a democratic secular state or a binational state, were being viewed by a growing number of people on both sides as a viable alternative to perpetual conflict. Israeli historian Ilan Pappé said this:

In the short term, what people want to do is separate. But it never delivers the goods. All that separation has delivered is more violence ... I don't think even a bi-national state is the last phase. I think it is a democratic, secular state (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A36478-2004Jul8.html>).

On the Palestinian side, the late Edward W. Said, who emerged as one of the idea's key champions, said the following:

The lives of Israelis and Palestinians are hopelessly intertwined. There is no way to separate them. You can have fantasy and denial, or put people in ghettos. But in reality there is a common history. So we have to find a way to live together (*Christian Science Monitor*, May 27, 1997).

In an interview with David Barsamian, Said again endorsed secular binationalism, not only as a desirable outcome but also as a necessary reality:

It is unlikely that a place like Israel—which is surrounded on all sides by Arab states—is going to be able to maintain what, in effect, is a system of apartheid for Palestinians (Barsamian 1999, 35).

Other Palestinian intellectuals, such as Nadim Rouhana, perceive the connection between Oslo's failure and the eventuality of a single binational state in all of historic Palestine:

The failure of the Oslo process to yield a viable Palestinian state could lead to the convergence of interests of all segments of the Palestinian people in calling for a unitary state in Palestine. Indeed the most likely response to the fading hopes for a Palestinian state will be not the acceptance of a Bantustan system of government in the West Bank, but the development of a mainstream political program that redefines the Israeli–Palestinian conflict from one over territory and sovereignty to a conflict over power sharing and equality of Palestinian and Jew in historic Palestine in the form of a binational or secular state—the same issue that the Palestinians in Israel are struggling for (Rouhana 1998, 78).

On the Israeli side, Meron Benvenisti, former deputy mayor of Jerusalem, makes the link between Sharon’s “disengagement plan” and Bush’s declarations, on the one hand, and an eventual binational state, on the other:

Ariel Sharon ... will be surprised to discover that in Washington he was pushed into embracing an accelerated process of founding the State of Israel as a bi-national state based on apartheid.... Sharon’s rhetorical victory is sown with the seeds of its own destruction. The ... scenario which Sharon so badly wanted to avoid will unfold (Benvenisti 2004).

Similarly, Israeli academic (and son of Holocaust survivors) Haim Bresheeth views the single state as the only solution now that Israel has made sure the two-state solution is off the practical agenda:

What Chomsky is suggesting [the two-state solution] is too little, too late. Not because Palestine rejected this solution, but because Israel did.... While it is not clear when such an advanced solution of Jews and Arabs living together may materialize, it seems that it is the only one left, as Israel has made damned sure no other solution is allowed even half a chance (Bresheeth 2004).

Another Israeli writer, Daniel Gavron, who has been a Zionist for most of his life, writes in his latest book, *The Other Side of Despair: Jews and Arabs in the Promised Land* (2003), that the only solution, to his mind, that could preserve the Jewish state—partition into two states, Israel and Palestine—is no longer tenable. If Israeli Jews now wish to secure their long-term future in the region, he explains, they must agree to abdicate Jewish sovereignty and move swiftly, while the balance of power still tilts in their favour, to a multi-ethnic democracy (Hirschberg 2003).

### Conclusion

Any reasonable alternative to the now defunct Oslo Accords, the Road Map, and Sharon’s so-called Disengagement Plan, all of which have failed to terminate the successive occupations, must repair the resulting fragmentation of the Palestinians into several sub-communities. It will have to guarantee the removal of disadvantages inflicted on the Palestinians in the three distinct spheres (those living in the Palestinian territories of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem; those inside Israel; and those in the far-flung diaspora). No degree of independence or liberation can be meaningful without removing the legal, social, and economic disabilities that set the Palestinians apart and have left them physically and legally disjointed. Not only have these communities acquired their own social and economic agendas, as well as subcultures, but the task of reintegration would require resources that are simply unavailable, given the imbalance of power and the existing geopolitical order.

Under less inauspicious circumstances that might prevail in the longer term, a remedy might be sought through a determined, systematic, and protracted struggle, combining the three segments of the Palestinian people, jointly with Israeli Jews who wish to be neither master of another people, nor privileged in an apartheid system, nor

colonial settlers denying the existence of the indigenous natives of the land or wishing their disappearance.

Such a momentous transformation is unlikely to happen in the near future, and it may be an uphill struggle in the medium term as well. Bush's deadline for his truncated Palestinian state has already been postponed from 2005 to 2009—three years from now. By that time, the present military occupation will have been repackaged but declared terminated, not unlike the “disengagement” from Gaza, which is a disengagement from the so-called peace process. The Palestinians and the Israelis will have been separated by the Wall and by a road system with numerous portions designated “for Jews only.” It will also be dominated by tunnels, underpasses, and overpasses—an apartheid that would make South Africa's system look like one of benevolent coexistence.

An unwritten agreement seems to prevail between the various factions that make up the Israeli body politic on the need to partition the country without open negotiations. From Israel's vantage point, the desired arrangement would be an amalgamation of the Allon plan of the 1970s and the Sharon plan of 1981, with a flavour of the Jordan option. The Israeli state would absorb the settlement blocs of Etzion, Maaleh Adumim, and Givaat Zeev, thus making greater Jerusalem a single metropolis demarcated by the River Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea. The Israeli state would also absorb the bloc of Ariel and the nearby settlements in the Nablus–Tulkarm–Jenin triangle, making the Palestinian state a patchwork of enclaves. Sharon's strategy would be to create a temptation for the Palestinians of the West Bank to drift towards Jordan as much as possible and thus help to ease his demographic and political predicament. Meanwhile, Sharon would declare his arrangement another generous offer, even though, as a mere 8 % of Mandatory Palestine, it would fall far short of the 22 % that Israel was asked to return after the war of 1967.

Five to 10 years later, however, this system will begin to fracture under its own built-in contradictions, which will make life for both Jews and Arabs unsustainable. The Oslo gridlocks will no longer obscure the malady. The un-implementable “two-state” formula will have been exposed as an alibi that has run its course. The single state in all of pre-1948 Palestine, which is a type of system transformation, will loom on the horizon as the only alternative to Arabs' yearning for a new Saladin.

In a new international order with an altered balance of forces, the structural flaws that led to a fragmented body politic and a crippled Palestinian economy will begin to dissipate. The numbers game that has characterized the period of the peace process will have come to an end. With sovereignty no longer at the core, the struggle will shift away from grabbing territory, steering attention away from the size of the ghettos and Bantustans to expanding and improving the pool of common services, sharing the basic rights, and dealing with the basic human needs—food, housing, health, education; basic decencies—protection against genocide, vigilante torture, detention, and arbitrary arrest; participatory rights—participation in the process that controls people's lives, jobs, places of residence, processes shaping norms, national and ecological security; and humane governance, all designed to insure the well-being, security, and survival of both peoples.

By 2050, the Wall, known to some as the Wall of Separation and to others as the Apartheid Wall, will have been dismantled, since its very existence negates the concept of a vibrant, open, democratic, and inclusive Palestine and Israel. Danny Rubinstein writes the following about the Wall's effect:

The wall, in this case, is not just an obstructive element of separation; it is an Israeli instrument of control. Its existence permits complete Israeli surveillance of the lives of Palestinians, of commercial activity, of services, of society in general. (Rubinstein 2005)

This type of arrangement will stand in contradiction with the ethos of the mid-21st century, calling for a new struggle to achieve common goals.

The goal of the struggle will have to be equal protection of the law in any such unified state—as in the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: the illegality of any disparity or classification in protection of the law, the end of group segregation, and its removal from the social, economic, and legal fabrics of society. Equality for every single human being in Palestine/Israel will be the motto of the new struggle. This kind of struggle may sound unrealistic, and the goal idealistic or utopian, but it certainly has more prospects for success than the whole range of the “peace process,” which has already been relegated to the dustbin of history.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For a cogent analysis of the Disengagement plan in the broader context of Sharon's long-term strategy, see Sussman (2005).

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