

# Editorial: Is a Two-State Solution to the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict Still Possible?

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Over the past several years, the Oslo peace process has proved beyond a doubt that it is going nowhere, after almost a decade since its launch in 1993. This lack of progress was coupled with Israel's intensifying of its colonial project in the West Bank and elsewhere during the same period, clearing and cleansing houses and people from the Rafah border areas with Egypt, all of which has led, in concrete practice, to much more fragmentation of the remaining Palestinian territory, leaving a spatial residue for a modern Palestinian state on less than one-eighth of Mandatory Palestine. In the wake of this reconfiguration of Palestinian space, there has been a widespread rethinking of the basic viability of the two-state option as a solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

I originally addressed this question in a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of Association of American Geographers in Denver, Colorado, in April 2005 and subsequently published in *Third World Quarterly* (Falah 2005). As I argued there, a close look at Israel's behaviour on the ground suggests that it is leading unmistakably to the effective demise of the two-state option. Ariel Sharon's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza is part of a broader plan to *separate* from the Palestinians and leave them in a spatial limbo. The Wall of Separation is one signifier of this demise, cutting through much of Palestinian land, separating homes and people from each other and creating a maze of Palestinian enclaves as the territorial foundation of any step forward toward sovereignty. A reasonable appraisal suggests that this is the major nail driven into the coffin of the two-state option for a peaceful territorial solution to the

enduring impasse, even as the Wall is gouged ever further into the land.

With this background in mind, in my capacity as editor of *The Arab World Geographer*, I thought it timely and intellectually desirable to deepen discussion on the entire question by inviting 10 scholars to address the topic, each from his or her own perspective.

Most of the scholars invited to contribute to this forum were not aware of my own paper in the *Third World Quarterly* (still in press while they were preparing their contributions to this forum), nor did they see one another's contributions. These considerations were all in my mind, aimed at getting fresh and genuine ideas about the question within the weeks that followed the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, a seemingly major event in the chronology of the Occupation.

Once all the essays were submitted, I invited three scholars (Ron Johnston, Ann M. Lesch, and Gearóid Ó Tuathail [Gerard Toal]) to provide input on the forum after reading it as a whole, and as they saw fit, without my interference as editor.

This is the fourth forum of the *Arab World Geographer* published in its pages and posted on its website (<http://users.fmg.uva.nl/vmamadouh/awg>). Needless to say, as in the case of an edited book, the selection of the contributors determines the quality of the finished product. My invitation of contributors to this forum from both sides of the divide was not intended to present a Palestinian versus Israeli perspective. Rather, the 10 contributors were selected because of my belief that they all have a genuine concern about the current crisis in Palestine/Israel and because they all adhere to the principle that

the Palestinian people deserves its own state and that Israel's occupation of Palestinian land will never bring a viable peace. I did not consider inviting contributions from those who believe otherwise, that is, scholars who negate the Palestinians' right to self-determination and to have a state of their own.

Significantly, my request to the 10 contributors was that they provide a short essay and try not to expatiate on history or on the theories of the conflict and its complexities. Instead, I was interested in seeing some sort of prediction about the current situation and the unfolding events and scenarios in the near future—say, three to five years from now. Most contributors adhered to these instructions. The exception was Rafael Reuveny, whose essay was double the expected length. I decided to publish Reuveny's contribution in its current form because it is an excellent piece and because it provides an overview introduction and comparison of the background to Israel's colonial project while addressing both "bina-tional" and "two-state" options. The remaining nine contributors and three commentators have skilfully adhered to the suggested length, each focusing on the topic in his or her own way and according to his or her own understanding.

As noted by the two commentators to this forum (Ann M. Lesch and Gearóid Ó Tuathail [Gerard Toal]), Palestinian contributors have less hope that Israel's colonial strategy on the ground will eventuate in a fair and viable two-state solution and feel that a bina-tional polity is becoming more of a thinkable option than ever before. Of special interest is Ali Jarbawi's suggestion for dismantling of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in order to expose the true "face" of Israeli occupation of the land and "force" Israel to take its responsibility as an occupier, based on relevant international and humanitarian laws. In other words, Jarbawi suggests a return to square one. This line of thinking might have been reasonable for the decade following the occupation of the territories from June 1967 on,

but it is probably not feasible today; it has been overtaken by realities. I doubt that the international community would consider any option to pressure Israel to withdraw from the land. Israel's constant oppression of Palestinians and assassination of its leaders, around the clock and in front of cameras, has become naturalized. Israel's political elite is oblivious to any concern and criticism from European governments or the American administration. Israel knows very well that it can kill the best Palestinian young men and women and will not be blamed for doing so. We live in a world of double standards—perhaps triple standards—which, of course, in a sense means no effective universal standards for conduct on a geopolitical plane. All may be "equal," but some are far more "equal" than others. That is the principal subtext of the Israeli state and the continuing conflict.

Commentator Ann M. Lesch is precisely correct in saying that "[t]hree of the four Israeli authors (David Newman, Rafael Reuveny, and Izhak Schnell) use cost-benefit analysis to conclude that the two-state solution is most likely to emerge—as well as most beneficial to both sides." I would submit that such a viewpoint prevails most among Zionist liberal and left-Israeli scholars and commentators who advance the two-state option because of its potential to maintain the purity of Israel's Jewishness, its sedulous ethnocracy. It has little to do with any just solution to the conflict as a whole, including the Right of Return of Palestinian refugees to their pre-1948 homeland. The claim for preserving a Jewish majority in Israel within the framework of "two-state solution" is, I fear, an invented discourse that became one of Israel's geopolitical codes after 1990. It is a purely territorial claim, a discursive *enabling act*, so that Israel can justify its hold on 77 % of Mandatory Palestine (an area it conquered and occupied during the 1948 war) and, at the same time, make it impossible (at least morally) for Palestinian refugees to return to any part of Palestine, whether in Israel or in

the post-1967 Occupied Territories.

The problem remains: The fact that some commentators and contributors in this forum adhere to a two-state solution does not make this solution just. It cannot provide a basis for resolving the question of Palestinian refugees. Hence, the logic of binational state in Palestine/Israel may be reasonable and closer to a *just solution*, in the more pragmatic sense, than any thing else because it will accommodate the return of Palestinian refugees to any locality (village or town) they choose in Palestine, just as any Jew today has this privilege.

Commentator Ron Johnston's observation is very useful in addressing the nature of such a binational state, if it emerges. As he states, "if the binational state solution is preferred ... will it be feasible to build a state apparatus that has the willing consent of a vast majority of the population within that territorial container?" This type of state apparatus, according to Johnston, "would have to convince all sections of the territory and population that they have equal economic, cultural, and political rights, as well as facilitating the successful promotion of capitalism and ensuring that all sections of the population be benefit, if not equally, then at least sufficiently ..."

The answer to this question is "yes" if the Israeli people, the working class, chooses to dismantle Zionism and its theocratic regime and replace it with a more democratic system. But that impetus must come from the people, from below, the grassroots—not from the political elite, which, in Israel, is completely beholden to what in the United States is called the "military–industrial complex" and its agendas.

The required Jewish concessions will be considerable. In such a state, the privileged members of the Israeli kibbutzim would be obliged to return much of the best fertile land given to them by the Israeli state to the returnee Palestinians. Israeli settlers in the West Bank will no longer have the privilege of literally stealing the water from the

Palestinians beneath their own lands. These are only a few of the examples that can be pointed out. The opposition to binational solutions by those who advocate a two-state solution is not merely because of the issue of Jewishness and the ethnic purity of the territory; rather, it stems from other economic considerations. If the issue of Jewishness is so important for Israelis, why have some chosen to settle in Al Khalil (Hebron), in the old city of Jerusalem, near major Arab towns inside Israel (such as Nazareth), and elsewhere in mixed cities, or even in the Gaza Strip, from 1967 to mid 2005? Why did the pre-state Zionist leaders in the *Yishuv* accept a Jewish state in Palestine, whose population, at the time, was some 45 % Palestinian-Arab? The answer is probably tied to the dynamics of control and to pragmatic considerations about how to advance that dynamic and has nothing to do with the Jewish character of the state. Control of land and resources: This is the agenda of long-term settler-colonial projects virtually everywhere on the planet. It was the agenda in the "winning" of the American West; it is the agenda in the subjugation and control of the Arab East.

Sharif Elmusa's proposal, on the other hand, is one that needs serious discussion. It reflects much courage on the part of a scholar to even think about proposing such an option. Elmusa's proposal, if considered, will almost certainly resolve many of the thorny issues that Palestinians and Israeli Jews have been wrestling with for decades, such as border issues, Jerusalem, and—above all—the return of Palestinian refugees to Greater Palestine. Territory is central to Elmusa's proposal. He proposes creating a new territorial unit made up of the land inside Israel within the Green Line, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the current State of Jordan. Once we secure enough territory for everyone, there will be a home for everyone to move into and out of in this vast new political unit. This is basically the rationale behind Elmusa's solution—a rationale that suggests dismantling the apparatus of three states

(Israel, Palestine, and Jordan) and allowing people to choose their destinies and elect their leaders. Basically, Elmusa suggests that in this new framework and space, no longer will Israelis be so concerned about issues of Jewishness and the Palestinian refugee problem will be solved (or perhaps dissolved) in the fabric of the creation of this new territorial unit. This brings Johnston's question once again to the fore: Will the apparatus of this state be able to secure equal opportunities and rights for Jordanians, Palestinians, and Israelis, or not? And of course, they will no longer be Jordanians or Israelis or Palestinians in a national sense. Or will they?

Oren Yiftachel's scenario is probably the most accurate for the current reality in the Occupied Territories. The Israeli political elite has chosen unilateralism as the least costly strategy, deciding whatever suits them as far as borders are concerned, desiring to secure the land but not the Palestinian people. They claim they have no partner for peace now and, in fact, never had one. They refuse to comply with virtually all relevant UN resolutions pertaining to the conflict. They maintain a nuclear arsenal that is anything but "secret," the epitome of "double-standard" politics from Washington, the European Union, and the United Nations in dealing with the Middle East.

Israeli unilateralism has a concrete and steel icon: an eight-metre wall separating Palestinian localities from each other and from their agricultural lands and, quite literally, *stonewall* any possibility of a peaceful solution. Lesch accurately notes that "[t]he logic of unilateral *faits accomplis* dictates outcomes that are far more likely to lead to an enlarged Israeli state walled off from Palestinian ghettos than to any stable two-state or single-state resolution."

All the political parties in Israel basically support the separation barrier. But there are others, individuals and an array of NGOs, who oppose it, and the demonstrations by Palestinians and Israelis united together against the Wall at the small village of Bil'in

on the West Bank continue, an expression of solidarity and what is called in Arabic *ta'ayush*, togetherness. It is that kind of togetherness that must be forged among people from many walks of life if a one-state solution is to become any kind of reality in the future. The French philosopher Bruno Latour has said that we need to "change our ways of changing," and that is certainly true when it comes to thinking about a solution in Palestine and Israel that is just and meets the perceived needs and desires of the people involved. The people will have to decide, not their political classes. So Johnston talks reasonably about "the willing consent of a vast majority of the population," but perhaps the real motivating force for that new structure has to come from a great popular base in both the Jewish-Israeli and the Arab-Palestinian communities. Far more than mere "consent" to what a political elite may draft and try to impose, it may require the emergence of other forms of what some call *deep democracy*.

The path of unilateralism will likely lead to more bloodshed, but it seems attractive to many ordinary Jewish Israelis. They would have to be shown that it is disastrous, both for them and for the Palestinians from whom they cannot now separate, their fates intertwined. Elmusa's proposal would have to be acceptable to the masses of Jordanian citizens. It needs much political work and consciousness-raising, but perhaps a broader federation over the long term is feasible.

The challenge we have posed here is not to predict the future but to try to imagine what is just and thus sustainable. More and more Israelis are beginning to think that a Zionist state is an idea hatched in the 19th century, and realized by extreme force and ethnic cleansing in the 20th century, that should be laid to rest in the 21st. It didn't work. It couldn't. You cannot build a state in someone else's country. You cannot settle Palestine the way European colonists settled North and South America in the great age of colonialism.

The numbers of Jewish Israelis who

understand this are still small, but great changes in political thinking are possible. But this is true only if a thousand bridges are built between Jews and Arabs inside the present Israeli state, doing away quickly with the official structures of what most observers think is a kind of apartheid—and building many bridges between Jews and Arabs in what are still brutally occupied territories. Bridges between people, families, schoolchildren. Without an end to that occupation, the *Ihtilal*, all viable avenues for any such platform for *ta'ayush* and a real solution are blocked. The bridge must become the new emblem of a pathway forward, to two states, to one state, maybe to a broad federation—not a wall.

The physical wall will have to go, as will the mental wall in the heads of so many on both sides of the divide.

#### **Acknowledgment**

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#### **References**

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