

The Remaining Palestinian Options

Ali Jarbawi

Faculty of Law and Public Administration, Birzeit University, P.O. Box 14, Birzeit, West Bank, Palestine

It seems clear that Israeli strategies have changed as a result of the occupation of what is left of the 1967 Palestinian territories. Ever since this occupation began, Israeli efforts have focused on accomplishing the classical Zionist goal of transforming all of Palestine into a Jewish state and achieving an absolute Jewish majority. Continual efforts have been made to change the human geography and the demography of the Occupied Territories by means of a far-ranging policy of Jewish settlement, accompanied by strategies for expelling as many Palestinians as possible from the area. As time goes on, however, it has become clear that achieving these goals is much more complex than successive Israeli governments had expected. The basic reasons for this were the rapid increase in the number of Palestinians and their strong commitment to stay on their land. The conclusion on the Israeli side, therefore, was either to continue with the annexation of all Palestinian lands, together with their inhabitants, thus diluting the Jewish identity of the Jewish state, with a gradual move towards a binational state; or to give up control over the vast majority of Palestinians, which meant the abandonment of occupied 1967 Palestinian land to the Palestinians.

Israeli politicians have weighed demographic factors against the realities of geography. Priority has been given to the goal of maintaining a “pure race” rather than that of retaining all the occupied land. This modification of the classical Zionist goal has not, for most Israeli politicians, made it necessary to abandon all the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 with a view to getting rid of the demographic burden of their Palestinian inhabitants, or to accept the establishment of an independent and sovereign Palestinian

state. Had this been the case, the conflict in the Middle East would by now have been resolved. Israel, however, has not yet gone through this degree of transformation. Changes are restricted to the amendment of goals so as to get rid of social, economic, and legal responsibility for the largest possible number of Palestinians by relinquishing the smallest possible area and the least amount of sovereignty—a Palestinian autonomy that may be called a “state” or, if it wishes, even an “empire” and that allows Israel to maintain control over the maximum possible area of occupied land while granting the Palestinians the least possible influence over Israel’s Jewish future.

The Zionist left wing, and left centre, were the first to be convinced of the necessity of transforming the classical Zionist goal and the first to start its implementation. In the end, Shimon Peres managed to impose a plan for execution and, together with Yitzhak Rabin, made this plan a practical reality through the famous Oslo Accords, which eventually resulted in the transformation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), following its recognition of Israel, into an authority associated with Israel through unfair but binding agreements. From Israel’s point of view, the Palestinian Authority (PA) was not the cornerstone of the deconstruction of occupation and the establishment of a sovereign and independent Palestinian state but, rather, a means for Israel to escape the burden of the Palestinian presence, threatening its existence, while at the same time retaining the largest possible area of Palestinian land. The Israeli plan behind the Oslo Accords was to give the PA secondary authority over scattered patches within the “Greater Israel” in exchange for maintaining full control over

Palestinians “squeezed” inside these zones. This would eliminate the danger of integrating Palestinians into Israel and guarantee that there would be no binational state even though Israel had failed to expel those Palestinians. The Oslo Accords were therefore the only possible means for Israel to stop the gradual flow towards a binational state. At the same time, they guaranteed continued control over the occupied Palestinian land. The agreement thus achieved more than one goal at the same time.

Ariel Sharon, the right-wing leader who had long held fast to the concept of the “Land of Israel,” finally agreed to the amended Zionist goal and to the necessity of achieving this goal to preserve the identity of the Jewish State. Three reasons may lie behind this transformation: first, Sharon’s inability to cancel the Oslo Accords and destroy the PA, which, despite all his attempts, continued to be internationally accepted; second, the abandonment of his ideas regarding the substitute Palestinian homeland (“Jordan is Palestine”) as a result of the signing of a Jordanian–Israeli peace agreement, which reduced the chances that the 1967 Palestinians could be expelled to Jordan; and, third, the declaration of U.S. President George W. Bush’s vision of resolving the conflict through a two-state solution with Palestine as a viable state, followed by the U.S. Road Map, which was adopted by the Quartet and became an international plan. Because of these declared changes in the internationally backed U.S. position, Sharon understood that the issue of establishing a Palestinian state had been decided and that Israel’s intervention would be restricted to influencing the conditions, description, and standards of this state. For Sharon, the Palestinian state has become a necessary evil guaranteeing the future of Jewish Israel. Instead of preventing the establishment of this state, his target is now to impose Israeli conditions for its establishment. Sharon has finally come to realize what Peres understood from the beginning: the necessity of countering the danger of the

Palestinians’ existence inside “the Land of Israel” by keeping them out of the land, even though they are physically still there.

Following the convergence between Sharon and Peres, the Israeli strategy has become one of incurring the least possible loss. And for Israel, the main, and perhaps the only, issue regarding the Palestinian state is the West Bank (including Jerusalem). Israel is connected to “Judaea and Samaria” through a complicated system of religious, strategic, political, security, and economic ties that are very difficult to untangle. There are more than 400 000 Israeli settlers inside the West Bank, and they constitute an important part of the Israeli political mosaic, very difficult for any Israeli politician to ignore. Israel cannot, therefore, completely withdraw from this part of the Occupied Territories and allow for complete Palestinian sovereignty over them. The Gaza Strip, on the other hand, is a totally different case. It constitutes only 1.3 % of historical Palestine, is inhabited by 1.3 million Palestinians, and, before the evacuation of its settlements, had only 7 500 settlers. Its settlements were a heavy security burden for Israel and had no great strategic or religious importance. Moreover, a majority of the Israeli population has never objected to getting rid of the Gaza Strip and its many burdens. The Israeli evacuation of this small and unimportant bit of land relieves Israel of the presence of 25 % of the total Palestinian population under its control, gaining an additional 10 or 20 years in the current demographic battle.

To take control of the plans to establish the Palestinian state, and to pre-empt possible international pressures, Israel initiated the construction of the Wall of Separation inside the West Bank. The object was to leave Gaza to the Palestinians without terminating Israeli control over it, to squeeze West Bank Palestinians inside cantons, and to annex vast areas in the West Bank, including greater Jerusalem. Following the imposition of “facts on the ground,” the Israeli tactics include proposing a political settlement to the

Palestinians, portrayed as provisional, whereby the PA is granted wide authority over the Gaza Strip and West Bank ghettos (excluding Jerusalem). After 10 to 15 years, if Israel feels that its security is guaranteed and has verified “peaceful Palestinian intentions,” it may launch negotiations with Palestinians over final settlement issues. This settlement will be predetermined, and will even be *de facto* imposed.

Israel’s declaration of its intention to annex Jerusalem and the West Bank settlement blocks, together with the current measures on the ground involving settlement building in the West Bank, including Jerusalem, signifies that Palestinians will not be able to establish a sovereign and independent state on Palestinian lands occupied in 1967, even in the presence of a “Road Map” and a “Quartet,” and in spite of any political settlement negotiations that may take place in the current context. Israel does not want a settlement that may be agreed to by Palestinians and Arabs; rather, it wants to impose its own settlement and make its conditions part of the Road Map, thus transforming its imposed settlement into the internationally proposed settlement. This explains why Israel agreed to the international Road Map only after insisting on 14 substantial amendments that rob the plan of any real value. In essence, the Israeli settlement amounts to an agreement on the establishment of a Palestinian state that will be, even in a best-case scenario, a rump state: What remains to Palestinians is land Israel does not want to annex because of its dense Palestinian population. Israel is even attempting to keep these leftovers to a minimum. As the international community, especially the United States, backs Israel, one can expect no great pressure to be exerted on it to change its plans and accept a withdrawal from the occupied Palestinian territories and the establishment of a sovereign and independent Palestinian state.

What are the options for Palestinians, in light of their inability to establish their state as they wish? Only two options are available.

The first is to refuse the current Israeli settlement, which involves a rump state and offers butchered lands and incomplete sovereignty. However, the mere persistence of Palestinian rejection of this settlement, as currently proclaimed, is not enough to prevent it from being imposed, given of the unilateral manner in which Israel is acting. Palestinians, if they are truly to reject a rump state, must create circumstances that will transform this rejection into a reality that Israel cannot overcome. The only available option in this case would be the dismantling of the PA. In its absence, all Israeli measures aiming to confine and separate out Palestinians from direct Israeli occupation would be of no legal value. Without the PA, Israel will not be able to cover up its continued occupation of Palestinian lands. Most importantly, Israel will not be able to halt the march towards a binational state. The most important requirement for achieving a binational state is not to have two authorities, each controlling each of the two nations (one Jewish-Israeli and one Palestinian). As Israel is the occupying power, the strongest, and its dismantling will be more difficult in this conflict, Palestinians, if they want a binational state solution, should dismantle the weaker entity established by Israel to maintain the purity of its Jewish identity, namely the PA. The Israeli occupation would thus be exposed once again, as would Israel’s true nature as a racist state, one that is squeezing Palestinians inside ghettos and refusing their integration. In time, Israel would have to choose between accepting the reality of the binational state with Palestinian integration, or accept the full termination of Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and the establishment of a sovereign and independent Palestinian state. In the event of the dismantlement of the PA, there would be no room for any “neither-nor” scenarios, with Israel keeping the largest possible areas and disposing of as many Palestinians as possible. This is the current Israeli scenario, and it requires the continued existence of the PA.

Is it to be expected that Palestinians will

work for the achievement of this option, and thus dismantle the PA so as to push towards the transformation of the area into a binational state, or the definitive end of the occupation—especially given the many interests that have emerged as a result of the PA's existence? The answer is negative. The PA, despite all its weakness and dependence, is still in demand on the part of the numerous Palestinian sectors benefiting from its presence. It cannot be expected that the Palestinian leadership will sacrifice its new and privileged status, despite the limitations placed on its authority. Israel seems to have succeeded, through international support, in creating the objective and subjective conditions for the emergence of a rump state and the postponement into the indefinite future of a binational state.

It seems that the only choice left to Palestinians is the choice made for them by Israel since the signature of the Oslo Accords, namely the rump state. The conflict, therefore, will not be settled in the next decade. Israel will, however, continue engineering the realization of this choice by exercising external control over the Gaza Strip after its transformation into a canton disconnected from the West Bank. In the West Bank, Israel will continue its activities to transform Jerusalem into a Jewish city; intensify settlement efforts, especially in settlement blocks it seeks to annex; finish building the Wall of Separation; and create Palestinian ghettos that are connected only through Israeli-controlled crossing points. Meanwhile, the PA, through regional and international mediators, will continue to try to improve conditions for the partition of the West Bank and try to increase its share of that area. The relations between Israel and the Palestinians will continue to be heavy and difficult, with ups and downs of mutual violence.

Will the Palestinians accept this result, and will the Israeli-imposed reality transform itself into a permanent one? Palestinians are

unlikely to accept ghettos as a final settlement to the conflict with Israel. Such a resolution in no way fulfils Palestinian ambitions or needs, and the region will lack stability. In order for Palestinians not to lose hope, and in order for the region not to descend into a never-ending cycle of violence, Israel and the international community will continue to keep the negotiating process open. Meetings will continue to be held; the Quartet will occasionally issue statements. Donor countries will offer bribes for the imposed situation to be accepted, in the form of modest but dependable donations. Once Israel completes its division of the West Bank, it will be ready to move this option on to a new dimension, that is to say, from the Palestinian rump state to the assembled State of Palestine. The transformation will be concretized by allowing Palestinians to exercise wide sovereignty over the Gaza Strip, connecting it geographically to the Palestinian ghettos in the West Bank through Israeli-controlled passageways. Palestinian ghettos in the West Bank will be under the control of the State of Palestine, but not under its sovereignty. At a later stage, perhaps a few years later, and because such a situation will not be sufficient for the Palestinians, Israel may, with international support, further the establishment of a confederal relationship between Jordan and the Palestinian state. This will allow for the expansion of the geographic space granted to Palestinians and for large numbers of Palestinian refugees to be settled outside of Palestine, thus relieving the pressure on Israel without expanding the Palestinian state in any way that might threaten the Jewish state.

It may be claimed that such an option is too good to be true for Israel. However, given the current reality of Palestinian weakness, Arab collapse, and international bias in favour of Israel, we may realize a few years hence that this is no longer just an option but a reality that stands before the world.