

The Logic of Unilateralism

Ann M. Lesch

The American University in Cairo,¹ P.O. Box 2511, Cairo 11511 Egypt

Palestinians and Israelis have wrestled throughout the past century with the issues of how to realize their nationalist aims and whether the “solution” preferred by each can be reconciled with the aims and solutions proposed by the other party. Raw power—far more than nuanced negotiations—has determined the outcome of the struggle, a power struggle that has fostered polarization rather than opening up opportunities for recognizing the needs and rights of the alien “other.”

For early Zionists, the goal of a Jewish in-gathering on the site of their historic “home” appeared intrinsically praiseworthy; little if any attention was given to the claims or needs of the indigenous population. Except for the Cassandra-like warnings of such intellectuals as Ahad Ha’am, they assumed that Palestinians would either accept that in-gathering or willingly leave their homes. When those assumptions proved false, most Zionists reacted by concluding that a Jewish state could only be imposed by diplomatic clout backed by their own military force, in the context of rapid immigration and close settlement of the land. Although important elements organized through the Revisionist movement insisted on gaining control over all of Palestine (and also expanding into Transjordan) and recognized that this could be achieved only by force, the politically dominant elements in the Zionist movement presented a more nuanced position to the outside world. They argued that they were generously “willing” to divide the land between the Jewish nationalists and the Arabs.

When in 1937 Great Britain, which controlled Mandatory Palestine from 1917 to 1948, proposed a two-state solution, under which the Jewish state would control one-quarter of the land, Transjordan would absorb

two-thirds of the territory, and the balance (including Jerusalem and Bethlehem) would remain under British control, the Jewish Agency accepted this proposal as a means to gain the principle of state sovereignty while objecting strongly to the small size of the Jewish state and the exclusion of Jerusalem and insisting that Britain expel all the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from the territory of the proposed Jewish state. Similarly, in 1947, the Jewish Agency accepted the principle of partition while acting on the ground to expel the Palestinians from the area of the Jewish state and to expand its borders as far as possible without entering into a direct military confrontation with the British. The nascent Jewish state also made tacit arrangements with the Transjordanian monarch, which enabled him to control the West Bank in the aftermath of the 1948–49 war. For the Zionists, therefore, sovereignty over as much territory as possible was a cardinal principle, with the Palestinians (and other Arabs) viewed as obstacles that at times must be partly appeased but must primarily be guarded against, warded off, and (when feasible) expelled.

For Palestinians, the drastic changes that their country underwent from the late 19th century through the 1940s were incomprehensible and completely unfair. Living first under the Ottoman Empire and then under the British Mandate, they believed that they had the right to self-rule and political sovereignty along the same lines as the neighbouring Arab countries. That others could question their intrinsic national-political rights—as the indigenous population, living in Palestine’s towns and villages for hundreds of years—was totally shocking. It was one thing to accept Jews as refugees from Europe (as they had accepted Armenians fleeing Turkey)

and quite another to agree to let a foreign community become the majority, dominate Palestine's political life, and marginalize them.

Moreover, neither agreeing to a binational state nor territorial partition could be perceived as a positive step for the Palestinian Arab majority: They would lose under either "solution," either by denying their national aims under the binational state option (and risking becoming the minority as the Jewish community expanded via immigration) or by settling for a small portion of their national patrimony under the territorial partition option. Rejecting both these options, they sought to retain their rights within the entire territory—and then lost everything to the militarily stronger Zionist movement, the indifference of the outside world, and the ambitions of neighbouring Arab states that absorbed the remnants of Palestinian land and grudgingly hosted the more than 50 % of the Palestinian population that fled into exile.

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Today, the basic lines of conflict remain intact. Although Israel controls *de facto* all of Mandatory Palestine, it has not achieved political stability or security, and it continues to be confronted by the "problem" posed by the existence of the Palestinians. The present-day heirs of the Revisionists have seemingly relinquished claims to Transjordan, inasmuch as they do not seek to undo the 1994 Israeli–Jordanian peace treaty, but all other issues remain in play.

For Labor Zionists (heirs to the pre-1948 Jewish Agency leadership) and other "centrists," the preferred "solution" has been territorial partition within the West Bank and Gaza Strip, seized in June 1967. According to the July 1967 Allon Plan, Israel would absorb the Jordan Valley and the Judean desert (a long north–south corridor deemed vital to secure Israel's eastern flank against Arab attack) and a much-expanded Jerusalem as well as the Etzion bloc, a small area west of

Bethlehem where Jewish settlements had been implanted before 1948. Palestinians living in the highlands of "Judea" and "Samaria" would gain autonomy, linked to Jordan by a corridor that would pass through Jericho. This territorial concept remained dominant until 1977, although it was complicated by Labor governments' *de facto* acceptance of Jewish settlement in the Palestinian highlands as well as in the designated zones (Jordan Valley, Etzion bloc, and greater Jerusalem) and by Labor's assumption that all of the Gaza Strip must remain under Israeli control but not be incorporated into Israel because of its large Palestinian population.

When Likud swept to power in 1977, its central principle was that the territories occupied in 1967 were "liberated" rather than "occupied" or "administered." Therefore, close settlement by Jews throughout the territories must be fostered, in order to preclude territorial partition, and Palestinians would gain only limited self-rule under Israeli sovereignty. Until Ariel Sharon withdrew Israeli settlers from Gaza in August 2005, he was the chief architect of this settlement plan. As articulated by Sharon in 1981, the *fait accompli* of settlements and their connecting infrastructure would ensure Israeli control over nearly 60 % of the West Bank and an expanded Jerusalem; Palestinians would be confined to cantons and would, in his long-range projections, be substantially outnumbered by Jews.

While the Oslo accords, which Sharon deeply opposed, did bring about the cantonment of the Palestinians and the consolidation of Israeli control over greater Jerusalem, they provided for more substantial Palestinian self-rule than Sharon could tolerate—self-rule that his military reoccupation in 2002 undermined. But Sharon's premise that Jews would outnumber Palestinians in the West Bank was never realized, and, as several essays in this Forum mention, the demographic reality has continued to move toward an overall Palestinian majority in the area west of the Jordan River. Thus, the Labor-

logic of partition gained relevance for Sharon. It was best *not* to incorporate heavily Palestinian areas into Israel and thereby lose the overall Jewish majority. Instead, Israel could separate itself from those Palestinian areas, ward them off by well-guarded barriers, and unilaterally establish sovereign borders that would incorporate those areas of the West Bank deemed vital for Israeli national security. Removing a few settlers would be a small price to play to attain the larger national goal. The outcome would not lead to a two-state solution based on equality between the states but, instead, would continue the non-peace *status quo*, based on the assumption of permanent hostility. This is epitomized by the statement by Sharon's aide Dov Weisglass in 2004—cited by at least three authors in this Forum—that the outcome sought is not a negotiated peace settlement but, rather, the avoidance of a peace accord, as that would require discussing—and making “concessions” concerning—refugees, borders, Jerusalem, and Palestinian statehood.

If Israeli Zionist assumptions of the need to “other” and isolate Palestinians have remained intact over the years, Palestinian views have undergone painful shifts. The dream of restoring Palestine to its pre-1948 integrity, with Arabs sharing authority with a non-Zionist Jewish community, retains its appeal. Realizing this dream would solve the most fundamental existential problems: The difficult minority status of Palestinian citizens inside Israel would end, some if not all refugees would return home, and the tightly circumscribed lives of Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza Strip would be relieved. Psychological and physical space would be opened up for Arabs and Jews—an even larger space if, as Sharif Elmusa proposes, Jordan were included in this enlarged area.

The dream of a non-national single state runs up against the reality of polarization, hatred, and resentment—the inflamed nationalisms on both sides. In recent years that ethnic nationalism has been intensified by

impassioned religious rhetoric, with its absolutist (and diametrically opposed) political and territorial claims on behalf of Jews and Muslims. Circumstances under which most Israeli Jews would willingly shift away from their entrenched ethno-religious nationalism are unimaginable in the immediate future. Nonetheless, as several authors posit (including Israeli scholar Oren Yiftachel), it is important to hold to that dream as a vision of a just society in which “otherness” would be politically insignificant. Establishing a single state at present would result not in a non-national regime but, rather, in Jewish Israeli sovereignty over the entire territory, with decidedly unequal standing for Palestinians: A new, long struggle against an apartheid-like system would then emerge. Although this is not discussed explicitly in the Palestinian papers in the Forum, one could assume that, for some authors (such as Ali Jarbawi), this would be a route worth considering and a struggle worth pursuing.

If the Palestinian dream of a single state based on equality, rather than one-sided domination, is a chimera today, then what about the two-state solution? The Forum authors are sharply divided on its prospects. Three 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. They consider that, as Israeli Jews become more fearful of the looming demographic imbalance, demand for a two-state solution will become even more urgent. Yiftachel, in contrast, believes that the deeply ethnocentric Zionism movement cannot move beyond its approach of warding off and containing the Palestinians: Partial decolonization will lead to an unstable condition of neither two states nor one state—a new form of apartheid. This conclusion is shared by the Palestinian authors, who view U.S. and Israeli policies as having crippled (in the words of Naseer Aruri) the prospects for a two-state solution. With Gaza a prison and the West

Bank divided into walled-in ghettos, the once-hoped-for political, economic, and social viability of a Palestinian state has vanished. Yezid Sayigh notes that, hypothetically, a Palestinian state is possible so long as it acquires geographical continuity, viable borders, and sovereignty, but that Israel's unilateralist approach—combined with U.S. collusion with that unilateralism—will preclude that outcome. And even, we should recall, the post-Camp David negotiations in the fall of 2000 would have yielded an outcome in which 80 % of the Israeli settlers would remain on the West Bank, Israel would control most of greater Jerusalem, and the refugees would be left in limbo.

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When I worked on the West Bank 30 years ago—only a decade into Israel's occupation—I shared the emerging hope that an independent Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza Strip would provide the political centre deemed essential for that scattered people. Even though refugees would not be able to return to their pre-1948 homes, they would have a haven in which they could rebuild their lives and help to create a vibrant

political community. Over time, as they lived next to (but not under the rule of) Israel, a new relationship could be established, based on common interests if not mutual amity. Perhaps, in the future, cross-border and even confederal arrangements could be established that would make ethno-nationalist barriers less significant.

Instead, the deepening colonization and barricading off of Palestinian lands, the false hopes raised by the Oslo accords, and the incompetence and short-sightedness of much of the Palestinian leadership have polarized the two peoples ever more severely and intensified their violent attacks on each other. The 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. This logic assumes indefinite conflict, a conflict for which both peoples will continue to pay a heavy price in the years to come.

Notes

- ¹ This commentary represents the views of the author, not those of the university.