

There Is No Solution Other than a Two-State Solution

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The question is not whether a two-state solution is still possible—despite all the difficulties of its implementation. Rather, the question should be, Is there any other form of realistic conflict resolution for Israel/Palestine other than the two-state solution?

There are only two other solutions to the conflict (assuming that we do not agree with the recent call by the President of Iran for the obliteration of Israel). One of these is not a solution—namely, the continuation of the current situation of occupation. The other, which has become an increasing part of the public discourse in recent years, is the creation of a single binational secular democracy, to include all Israelis and Palestinians as citizens of a single political entity, with equal political and cultural rights. Looking in from the outside, this would appear to be the most logical solution to the conflict, based on criteria of human rights, self-determination, and power sharing to the mutual benefit of both religio-national communities.

Given the demographic realities and the impossibility of creating two states with a clean line of separation between the two groups, a binational state option also gets around the problem of drawing an artificial boundary that will leave the Palestinian Arab residents of Israel as an ethnic minority (we shall assume that this problem will not exist for the Jewish settlers of the West Bank, who, like their counterparts in the Gaza Strip, will have to evacuate their settlements under any form of two-state solution).

But political realities are stronger than demographic or democratic facts. The intense mutual animosity, hatred, mistrust, and fear felt by each group for the other will not allow any form of single binational entity to be

created. Public surveys among the Israeli (Jewish) public show, time after time, that one of the few issues in Israel around which there is a wide consensus (more than 90 % of Jewish respondents) is the absolute insistence of maintaining a Jewish majority in a Jewish state. While many Israelis can be persuaded to withdraw from the Occupied Territories and to forcibly evacuate the settlements, they will not agree to give up the *raison d'être* of the State of Israel, namely an independent and sovereign Jewish homeland.

It is precisely the re-emergence of the discourse of a binational single-state alternative in recent years that has brought many Israelis, including many who were opposed to such a solution in the past, to support a two-state solution to the conflict. As recently as the Oslo Agreements in the mid-1990s, it was still not stated categorically that the ultimate outcome of these agreements would be the establishment of a Palestinian state on all, or most, of the Occupied Territories. As recently as the 1980s, the notion of two states was still perceived, within Israel, as a radical solution of the extreme left wing. And yet, today, the two-state solution is now a consensus position that is central to the Road Map and supported, however begrudgingly, even by the present right-wing administration of Sharon and Olmert. The fact that they have no intention of implementing such a solution should not hide the fact that they have used the term “Palestinian State” in a way that could not have been dreamed about only 10 years ago, and this is important in changing the general public opinion in favour of such a option.

But is it, as even some Israeli commentators would argue, too late for a two-state solution, given the fact that there will always be a

20 % Palestinian minority inside Israel and the reality of more than 250 000 Israeli settlers in the West Bank who will oppose any further territorial withdrawals from this region with much greater vigour and violence than that which occurred during the Gaza disengagement? I have researched and followed the settlement movement for more than 20 years, and I do not agree with those commentators who argue that the relative ease with which the Gaza settlements were evacuated indicates that the same will happen if, and when, the Israeli government decides to evacuate settlements in the West Bank. This region is, for the settlers, the very ideological core of their political colonization activities; it is the home of the entire settler movement leadership. Opposition to further evacuations here will be much greater opposition than in Gaza, and this is truly one of the most difficult problems facing any future Israeli government when it decides to withdraw from the West Bank and enable the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

But even these problems are relatively minor compared to the all-encompassing Israeli opposition—from left to right along the political spectrum—to the transformation of Israel into a single binational state. As a result, the only real alternative to a two-state solution to the conflict is no solution to the conflict, meaning the continuation of the present situation in which Israel occupies the West Bank (perhaps with limited Palestinian autonomy as an interim agreement and as a result of U.S. pressure) and continues to expand the construction of the settlements. This is the worst-case scenario for the Palestinians and must be avoided at all costs. The price to be paid for refocusing the debate around the possibility of a single binational state solution is no solution whatsoever, a scenario that—even with renewed violence and Intifadas—still serves Israel's interests much more than those of the Palestinians.

Given the above argument, namely that the two-state solution is the only realistic way

to resolve the conflict, how can such a solution be implemented? As a political geographer interested in borders, I wish to focus here on the issue of border demarcation alone. The default boundary for a future Palestinian state is clearly the 1949 Green Line, which existed as a political boundary for 19 years until the 1967 war and has continued to remain *in situ* as a powerful administrative line of separation between sovereign Israel and the Occupied Territories ever since. The Green Line was neither in 1949, or currently, an optimal line of separation. It has many problems, not least in terms of the ethno-territorial separation between the Palestinian settlements on both sides of the line. The only other tangible border that has any visible dimensions is the recently constructed separation fence/wall. This is clearly unacceptable as a future border (even if this is Sharon's hidden agenda), not least because it has been imposed unilaterally and because it illegally annexes large chunks of the West Bank to Israel.

But the establishment of the separation fence/wall reminds us that, when all is said and done, borders are social and political construct, and they can be changed as and when politicians and diplomats deem necessary. There is nothing holy or sacred about the Green Line, except that it was negotiated bilaterally as part of the Rhodes Armistice Agreements in 1948–49. Any border demarcated as a result of bilateral negotiations, rather than unilaterally, and is implemented in the landscape by mutual agreement will be acceptable to the international community. There is absolutely no reason why a new border should not be demarcated that takes into account, as far as is possible (there is not, there never will be, an absolute line of ethnic separation), the realities on the ground. If this requires the transfer of territories from Israel to Palestine or vice versa, this is totally acceptable, as long as (a) the populations residing in these regions agree to such a move and (b) it is a bilateral agreement. If such an agreement is impossible to arrive at, then the

only legitimate border line will be the default border, namely the Green Line.

It should also be remembered that a two-state solution is part of conflict resolution. It can bring about the cessation of violence on both sides and a level of political equality and stability. Simply arriving at a peace agreement does not mean that two conflicting sides automatically begin a new era of reconciliation, cooperation, and mutuality. Even after conflict resolution, this will not happen for a long time, perhaps even two or three generations, once the two peoples stop fearing and mistrusting each other. This means that the functional nature of the border regime separating Israeli and Palestinian states will be more closed than open, limiting the free movement of people from one side of the border to the other. While Israel would probably like to return to a situation where the border is open to economic movement, especially of a cheap Palestinian menial labour force serving the interests of the Israeli capitalist economy, it will be for the Palestinians to decide whether they wish to retain a semi-open border or to close it altogether and limit their immediate economic and social contacts to the Arab world alone.

The Palestinian state will thus be faced with the classic dilemma facing all post-colonial states, namely whether to become a neo-colonial dependency of the former occupier for short-term economic reasons or to break off contact altogether, even if this brings greater social and economic dislocation than already exists. This dilemma will not be easy to resolve. There will be strong international and Israeli pressure to determine the nature of the border regime in such a way as to enable transboundary economic interaction, while for the Palestinians this may be critical in the early years as they set about rehabilitating their basic economic and housing infrastructure. The cost of not enabling immediate economic relief could be internal frustration

with the political leadership, internal fragmentation, and violence, resulting in political instability. The alternative—being subject to the economic whims of Israel—is also politically problematic, not least because of the Palestinians' desire to fully express and demonstrate the true meaning of sovereignty and independence.

Another territorial problem that must be overcome is the nature of the territorial link between the West Bank and Gaza Strip as part of a single state. Now that Gaza disengagement has taken place, but Israel continues to control most of the external land and maritime boundaries (with the exception of the Philadelphi line between Gaza and Egypt), the need for a tangible territorial link between the two components of a Palestinian state has become even more important than in the past. The Palestinian preference is for a sunken road, as this will allow greater flexibility and freedom for the Palestinians than a rail link running through Israeli territory, as has been suggested by Israel. But whichever option is finally implemented, it must be carried out sooner rather than later, so that the beleaguered Gaza territory can have breathing space and an outlet to the West Bank and the remainder of the future Palestinian state. It will also give the West Bank part of that state vital access to the sea if, as is to be expected, it does not wish to use the Israeli ports at Ashdod and Haifa.

In sum, I would argue that there is no real political alternative to the Israel–Palestine conflict other than the two-state solution. At the same time, however, we should not ignore the very real territorial, economic, and ethnic problems that will arise out of the implementation of such a solution and which, if not dealt with adequately and with substantial international assistance, could lead to future political instability in the new State of Palestine.