

A binational Israeli-Palestinian state “may come to be viewed as preferable to a two-state arrangement or a single polity in which winner takes all—and loser loses all. . . . The politics of accommodation and power sharing may prove to be the only viable alternative to endless war or brutal domination by one community over another.”

Is the Two-State Solution Dead?

GARY SUSSMAN

A growing chorus of dissenters has begun to challenge the two-state blueprint designed to bring an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They are calling instead for a single binational or secular polity that would encompass both Israel and the occupied territories. The latest to join the ensemble, political scientist Virginia Tilley, recently wrote in the *London Review of Books* that the two-state model, which has enjoyed uncontested hegemony as a formula for peace for well over a decade, “is an idea, and a possibility, whose time has passed, its death obscured (as was perhaps intended) by daily spectacle.”

Support for a single-state alternative, though it remains marginal today, undoubtedly will swell in the absence of genuine progress toward the two-state plan envisioned by the Oslo peace process. A recent survey found that 67 percent of Israelis “strongly” or “moderately fear” scenarios in which Israel finds itself in a one-state reality. The fear itself underscores growing awareness of the possibility.

The call to abandon the two-state solution includes two principal, but often confused, proposals. One is for a binational state, premised on recognition of two groups within one political entity. The other would involve a single democratic and secular polity based on one man, one vote. Whereas the former approach emphasizes constitutional recognition of collective entitlements, the latter is based on individual rights. Those calling for a binational state have variously spoken of federal formulas, while supporters of a secular state take postapartheid South Africa as their model. At present the two concepts are often used interchangeably.

There is, of course, a third alternative to the two-state outcome: a single undemocratic entity in

which Israelis rule a Palestinian majority. Palestinians fear that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon may also have in mind a truncated Palestinian state compromised of isolated mincantons (which have been compared to South African Bantustans or American Indian reservations) alongside Israel. This model would ensure maximal territorial control for Israel while minimizing the number of Palestinians living in the expanded Israeli state. It represents in effect a fourth potential one-state model. Yet some Palestinians have begun to embrace even this idea as part of a two-stage formula, the ministate serving as an interim phase toward a single state.

THE SINGLE-STATE PROPONENTS

Broadly speaking, three groups today are calling for the rejection of the two-state solution. The two most influential are to be found within the international community (mainly leftist intellectuals, including some Diaspora Jews) and among Palestinians (especially Diaspora figures, but also, increasingly, local leaders). An increasing number of Israelis are also joining the fray. None of these voices is yet mainstream, but doubts about the Oslo formula are spreading rapidly.

By far the most forthright of the opponents to the two-state solution are leftists who have a penchant for opposing nationalism and ethnic states and who tend to view Israel as a pariah. Labeled by some observers as anti-Semitic, these critics in Europe and elsewhere see Zionism as a discriminatory ideology and Israel as an inequitable state. The Oslo accords, however, drastically weakened their impact on public discourse. Along with leftist Israelis and Palestinians, many of these critics abandoned their opposition to a Jewish state in the hope that the two-state model would work, and on the assumption that both peoples desired this deal.

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The collapse of the Oslo process has revitalized this group. New York University history professor Tony Judt captured the critics' thinking eloquently in the October 10, 2003, *New York Review of Books*. "The problem with Israel," he wrote, "is not—as is sometimes suggested—that it is a European 'enclave' in the Arab world; but rather that it arrived too late. It has imported a characteristically late-nineteenth-century separatist project into a world that has moved on, a world of individual rights, open frontiers, and international law. The very idea of a 'Jewish state'—a state in which Jews and the Jewish religion have exclusive privileges from which non-Jewish citizens are forever excluded—is rooted in another time and place. Israel, in short, is an anachronism."

Judt's article reportedly prompted more than 30,000 letters to the editor. The scale of the response would appear to confirm Daniel Lazare's assessment in *The Nation* on November 3 that a "longstanding taboo has finally begun to fall." That taboo, in an American context, is a debate over the very legitimacy of a Jewish state.

In recent months this group of critics has been buttressed by individuals who do not ideologically oppose a Jewish state but who believe that a two-state model may have become impracticable. Among these are diplomats engaged in peace efforts who increasingly raise doubts about the Oslo process, despite the vast resources invested in it by the international community. They include Terje Roed-Larsen, the special envoy to the Middle East for the UN secretary general, who recently questioned whether Israelis and Palestinians are "nearing the death of the two-state solution, the bedrock for all our peacemaking efforts."

PALESTINIAN AND ISRAELI VOICES

Advocacy for a "secular Palestine" was the Palestine Liberation Organization's traditional position, but Israelis viewed support for the idea as tactical rather than ideological. Diaspora Palestinian intellectuals, who have tended to envision a secular and liberal rather than a power-sharing state, have traditionally dominated Palestinian opposition to the Oslo process. They feel vindicated by the current state of affairs.

Increasingly, the internal leadership of the various PLO factions is also finding a two-state solution

less attractive. Marwan Barghouti, who led Yasir Arafat's Fatah faction in the West Bank and was arrested in 2002 by Israeli authorities for directing terrorist attacks, said at the close of his trial that "I hope the Israelis have learned that the Palestinian people cannot be brought to yield with force. If an occupation does not end unilaterally or through negotiations then there is only one solution: one state for two people." Even more brazen is Ali Jerbawi, a political scientist at Bir Zeit University in the West Bank. He argues that the Palestinians should deliver an ultimatum to Israel demanding that it agree to a Palestinian state within six months, after which the Palestinians will insist that their territories be annexed.

Although the Palestinian Authority leadership, based in Ramallah, still supports a two-state formula, the growing dissonance between the street and the PA elite is perhaps best underscored by this very issue. PA officials, it has been suggested, have little choice

but to hold on to the two-state solution: it underlies not only their negotiating strategy but also their political legitimacy. Acknowledgment that

the dream of a Palestinian state is dying would imply the PA's irrelevance. Yet Palestinian officials are not blind to recent trends. PA Finance Minister Salam Fayyad warned in a memo to the Bush administration in October 2002 that Israeli settlement expansion was undermining the possibility of a two-state deal. Some advisers to the Palestinian negotiating team now argue that the Palestinian cause would be better served, strategically, by a demand for civil rights rather than a separate state.

Support for a binational state, though marginal, has a longstanding tradition among Israeli Jews, which goes back at least to Martin Buber and Judah Magnes. After Israel won independence, a few small groups retained their ideas, but after the 1993 Oslo accords most embraced the two-state solution. The most notable proponent of a binational polity since Oslo has been Azmi Bishara, founder of the Balad movement. Bishara has argued that Israelis support a Palestinian state to "keep the Jewish purity of the Jewish State" and views a truncated Palestinian state as a means to indirectly control the Palestinians. The past two years have seen support for a binational solution reemerge within the non-Zionist Israeli left. More important, elements of the Zionist left have felt compelled to ponder coping with a binational reality.

According to some critics, the pace of settlement expansion since the signing of the Oslo accords has in effect created a single state's geography.

On the other end of the political spectrum, members of Israel's ideological right and the settler movement are actively pursuing a single state. Whereas leftist one-staters (like their international counterparts) generally advocate democracy and civil rights, these groups are quite prepared to support ethnic cleansing—they call it “transfer”—or some form of Israeli apartheid to maintain Jewish hegemony west of the River Jordan. As the Hebron settler leader Noam Arnon has argued, “if there is a contradiction between this [Jewish] essence and the character of the government, it is clear that the essence takes precedence, and that steps are taken to prevent damage or changes to this Jewish essence. Democracy cannot be exploited to destroy the Jewish State.”

The leader of the National Religious party and a minister in the current Sharon government, Efi Eitam, recently set out his vision for a one-state Jewish entity between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean. It would draw legitimacy, he said, from the fact that the “only Jewish state in the world requires a minimum of territory.” Palestinians who wished to remain in the West Bank and Gaza Strip would be offered “enlightened residency,” as opposed to citizenship. Those unwilling to accept this status would have to relocate.

BEHIND THE ASSAULT ON OSLO

A variety of factors drives the resurgence of support for a single binational or secular polity. Intellectually, growing opposition to the notion of exclusive states must be seen against a backdrop of bloody conflicts in the postcommunist Balkans, deepening and widening European integration, and disagreement with the worldview that sees only inevitable clashes between national entities and civilizations. It should also be noted that Israeli violations of human rights (closure policies in the Palestinian territories, targeted killings of suspected Palestinian militants) and the Israel Defense Force's actions in the West Bank and Gaza have undermined support for Israel and its legitimacy. International legitimacy in ethnic conflicts is a critical resource, and both Israelis and Palestinians have sought to delegitimize each other. Israel has primarily succeeded in the United States, the Palestinians in Europe and the nonaligned world.

The portrayal of Israel in some quarters as a kind of apartheid state has in turn begged the question of a South Africa-type solution. From the relative success of the South African transition, and the apparent failure of Oslo, an emerging logic recommends at least consideration of different paths to

territorial self-determination, democracy, and peace. The increasingly discredited separate-states model is seen as actually reinforcing antagonism by pitting the needs and rights of each group against the other's. Some critics also find the Oslo formula a recipe for perpetual conflict because it allows for the maintenance of an exclusive Jewish state.

By far the most important factors accounting for the tidal shift in statehood discourse stem, however, from facts on the ground—developments since the outbreak of the current Intifada—and in particular the continued expansion of Israeli settlements and the building of a separation fence between Israel and the occupied territories. According to some critics, the pace of settlement expansion since the signing of the Oslo accords has in effect created a single state's geography. In the past year, the Israeli government has published more than 1,600 additional housing tenders for the occupied territories. This speaks volumes about Israel's commitment to the internationally endorsed “road map” to peace and President George W. Bush's maligned vision of two states for two peoples.

The settlement land grab, according to Israeli writer Meron Benvenisti, has nurtured a sense that the “connection between territory and ethnic identity—which was applicable up to about 20 years ago—cannot be implemented and any attempt to implement it will only complicate the problem instead of solving it.” Others simply doubt whether Israel is willing or able to extricate itself from the territories. The assassination of former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, in November 1995, serves as a striking reminder that many Israelis deny the right of a democratic government to surrender land promised by God.

Proponents of a single-polity solution note that it would bypass the need both to dismantle settlements and to deny Palestinian refugees the right of return. Interestingly, Rabbi Yoel Bin Nun has argued for “islands of Israeli citizenship within the Palestinian state and islands of Palestinian presence within the Jewish state.” His suggestion points to potential support among both Israelis and Palestinians for a binational arrangement that would allow for territorial unity with cultural and communal autonomy and segmentation.

The separation fence is viewed by many as confirmation of the “stingy” borders the prime minister has in mind for a future Palestinian state. As such, it nourishes fears that the Palestinian entity would prove unviable. Some proponents of the fence argue that it will create a de facto two-state

solution, leading to the inevitable evacuation of settlements east of the barrier. They further believe that the fence will “correct” itself over time, removing contours that Palestinians find intolerable. Skeptics submit that, far from enhancing the two-state solution, the fence has been effectively hijacked by the Sharon government to serve its own political agenda—namely, the creation of isolated Bantustans on some 42 percent of the West Bank. From the perspective of Sharon’s Likud party, such a state would be justified on the grounds that Israel requires strategic depth, including protected “security zones,” to defend itself.

It seems highly unlikely that Palestinians would agree to a two-state solution along these lines. As the PA’s former chief negotiator, Saeb Erakat, wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed, “It has become clear to many Palestinians that what Mr. Sharon and many other Israelis have in mind for the Palestinians is a ghetto ‘state’ surrounded by Israeli settlements, with no ability to defend itself, deprived of water resources and arable land, with an insignificant presence in Jerusalem and sovereign in name only. Palestinians will never accept such a future.” By undermining the two-state effort, Sharon’s fence over time could drive Palestinians to demand a one-state solution.

Also important in explaining Palestinians’ growing skepticism regarding the two-state model are the PA’s failure to develop credible and transparent institutions between 1994 and 2000 and the sense that Oslo’s failure has proved that the nationalist goal is unattainable. Bishara, the Balad leader, suggested in 1998 that “When it becomes fully apparent that an independent and democratic state occupying every inch of the West Bank and Gaza Strip free of Israeli settlements is not realizable, it will be time for Palestinians to re-examine the entire strategy. We will then begin to discuss a binational state solution.” History and Israeli actions may yet vindicate Bishara’s prediction.

THE SANDS OF TIME

Israelis and Palestinians may be engaged in a strategic waiting game. Israel under Sharon waits for opportunities, such as the departure of Arafat. Some Palestinians pursue the same game, believing that time and demographic advantage are on their side. They know that the Palestinian population, growing at a much faster rate, will soon constitute a majority in the land area combining Israel with the occupied territories. Whether one endorses the deliberate or unwitting accounts for Israeli dithering, there seems little to suggest that time is on Israel’s side.

The single-state debate does not yet pose a critical threat to the two-state solution, and powerful arguments and currents remain in favor of separation. As University of Pennsylvania political scientist Ian Lustick has noted in the *Boston Review*, “The secret power of the separate state solution is that it uses what each side strongly wants (the desire to be rid of the other) to achieve the territory, resources, recognition and immigration opportunities each side needs.” Still, the longer the diplomatic stalemate continues, and the further the settlements expand unabated, the more disillusioned Israelis and Palestinians will become with the separation formula.

Palestinians and, to a lesser extent, some on the Israeli left, view the shift in discourse toward contemplating a single state as a tactical resource to shock Israelis into compromise. Palestinian proponents of the one-state formula also hold that it will be easier for Palestinians to mobilize support—especially in the United States—for a civil rights rather than an anti-colonial struggle. Restricted access to the Israeli economy provides compelling utilitarian grounds for favoring a single polity over a truncated Palestinian state comprised of isolated enclaves.

The two-state solution could also be discredited by its longstanding association with the Palestinian ruling class, which is widely viewed as corrupt and inept. It is not inconceivable that challengers to the authority of the PA elites, within Fatah and from other factions, may view the demand for a one-state solution as a potential tool. Another possible scenario is that the PA leadership will eventually hand over all responsibilities for the Palestinian territories to the Israeli government. Already there are calls for the PA to stop providing a “fig leaf” for de facto Israeli occupation.

Ironically, erosion of support for a two-state solution among the secular nationalist Palestinian factions could make the militant fundamentalists of Hamas Israel’s unlikely but preferred negotiating partner. For its part, Hamas has the most to lose in a secular or binational state. In a reality where the ascendant Hamas enjoys growing popular support, Fatah may have no choice but to embrace a secular alternative to Hamas’s proposed Islamic state.

Meanwhile, the increasing use of the demographic argument in Israeli discourse could encourage more Palestinians to view the demand for a vote as an attractive strategy. The Israeli demographic debate highlights the fact that this is Israel’s greatest weakness, and, therefore, the Palestinians’ greatest advantage in the conflict. Israel’s current government appears bent on weakening the Palestinians in order

to create negotiating conditions that favor the strong. But the process may convince Palestinians that the single-state demand is the ultimate resource and revenge of the weak. In time, this scenario, combined with continued Israeli dithering, could see Israelis and Palestinians sliding into a situation where a two-state accommodation is either unattainable or wanted by only one party.

THE DEBATE IN ISRAEL

The idea of a binational state remains for now unacceptable to most Jews. Leon Wieseltier, writing in the October 27 *New Republic*, echoed the prevailing sentiment: “For what reasons do the Israelis have to depend for security and decency upon the talents of the Palestinians?” Certainly one of the many challenges facing any binational effort is for the Palestinians to show they are capable of peaceful, nonviolent mass action. Even so, debate over the two-state formula has reawakened within Israel, driven by diplomatic impasse and the demographic concerns increasingly raised by the Zionist left.

Sharon dismisses these concerns, arguing that Jewish migration to Israel will redeem the country. But he overlooks two important facts. One is the growing exodus of Israelis and a stampede for European passports. The other is European Jews’ increasing reluctance to come to Israel. East European Jews are voting with their feet and choosing Germany, and it seems unlikely that many French Jews will leave France, despite rising anti-Semitism there, as long as the security and economic situation remains worse in Israel.

Despite Sharon’s dismissal of the demographic challenge, prominent right-wing intellectuals and politicians are clearly mindful of the issue. In a dialectical fashion, this demographic discourse, along with continued terrorist violence, could serve to heighten an Israeli sense that the country must move quickly and decisively to extract itself from the quagmire. Israel might be provoked to downsize, unilaterally or in a two-state agreement.

But this is far from certain, and other radical solutions might also be considered. Although the left may well win the demographic argument, it is not obvious that the Israeli public will adopt its prognosis, as has been demonstrated by the debate over

the security fence. The Israeli right, which initially opposed the fence, embraced the idea as a result of public pressure, but applied its own political contours to maximize Israeli territorial control. The hazard of the demographic and indeed the binational argument is that scenarios depicting an endangered Zionist enterprise could frighten and radicalize Israelis and increase support for ethnic cleansing (transfer) or institutionalized discrimination.

Given the Jews’ history of suffering and genocide, all means may be justified to secure Jewish survival and sovereignty. At the very least, a switch in Palestinian demands will convince more Israelis that the Palestinians were always disingenuous maximalists, and that their support for a two-state solution was tactical. At worst, Israelis will embrace extreme

measures to oppose a binational state, currently understood as a recipe for a “Greater Palestine.”

The impact of a Palestinian switch to a demand for rights rather than territory,

or a de facto slide into a binational reality, could also prove potentially debilitating for Diaspora Jews. Divisions might arise between those who support Israel at all costs and those who place liberal values before narrow (tribal) loyalties. Whereas it is common in Israel to talk in anti-liberal, anti-democratic terms, most countries with large Jewish populations have adopted liberal political systems and values. These disparities could widen.

LESSONS FROM SOUTH AFRICA

If increasing numbers of Palestinian Diaspora figures and intellectuals abandon the two-state model, it will undermine the solution in a more fundamental manner. Internal Israeli legitimacy, though necessary, is not sufficient to make a two-state deal work. Without the support of Palestinian opinion leaders, Fatah, and the international community, the two-state solution will be viewed as an Israeli-imposed model—a Bantustan. This will significantly undermine the legitimacy of separation as the formula for resolving the conflict. Israel may simply run out of credible partners for a two-state deal.

South Africa offers a sobering lesson in this regard. In his book, *The Africans: Biography of a People*, Hermann Giliomee argues that, in seeking a deal that would provide whites with tangible

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minority rights in the 1990s, the Nationalist party leadership under President F. W. de Klerk was attempting to “purchase a political bargain at yesterday’s price—a bargain that was available to white South Africa . . . in the mid-1970s, perhaps even in the negotiations with Nelson Mandela, who had by then served 10 years in prison, and other leaders, but no longer in the 1990s.”

It is not clear when, or why, a deal that promised minority guarantees for whites became irreparably discredited. But a critical lesson for Israel is that seemingly marginal and isolated pleas to abandon what appears to be the logical and attainable outcome may suddenly reach a critical mass. As a result, the existing “deal” is swept aside. A similar fate for the two-state model cannot be ruled out.

Another lesson from South Africa’s experience, which might inform thinking about a single-state model, stems from differences between Israel and South Africa. When the latter underwent its transition to a one-man, one-vote state, the majority of its citizens shared a common faith (Christianity), and many of its churches were nonracial. Even more important, everyone—white and black—“imagined” themselves to be South Africans. The same cannot be said of Israelis and Palestinians. Bishara, for one, argues that a single polity without power-sharing arrangements and collective entitlements is not feasible: “We already have two developed national identities, and it is too late to dream about merging them into one nation.”

A DETAILED DEMOCRATIC ALTERNATIVE

For now, the one-state discussion lacks a detailed formulation of how the proposed polity would function. Indeed, the inability of one-state proponents to define their alternative has become a key argument of their critics. “What would Judt’s binational state look like?” asks *The New Republic’s* Wieseltier. “He is not very forthcoming about its particulars. His imagination does not keep pace with his indignation.” It is, however, only a matter of time before a detailed blueprint is developed. Such a guide would add new momentum to the debate.

A second claim deployed by Wieseltier to question the viability of a binational outcome is to argue that Palestinians are not democrats. This argument is flimsy on two counts. First, the assumption that Palestinian cultural and religious traditions are ill-disposed to democracy is questionable, if not racist. Cultures are neither set in stone nor incapable of accommodating to democracy. The active participation of Palestinian Israelis in an Israeli democ-

racy—which some would suggest has limits for them—offers a cogent example. It also could be argued that a Palestinian struggle against occupation or exclusive Jewish hegemony, in the name of democracy, would encourage Palestinians to internalize democratic values.

No less important, a binational reality may leave no other choice. Faced with this reality, the challenge will be to adopt constitutional designs that allow for democracy yet provide each community with specified constitutional guarantees and communal, cultural, and religious rights. Power-sharing arrangements, practiced with varying success in countries such as Belgium, the Netherlands, Zimbabwe, India, Austria, Switzerland, Cyprus, Lebanon, and Northern Ireland (after the Good Friday agreements of 1998), provide one possible exit from a polity in which one group dominates the other. Secular Israelis and Palestinians may view such a model as the most effective insurance against rabbis and mullahs who seek to impose theocracy.

Certainly Virginia Tilley is right to warn that a “formally ‘binational’ state, recognizing and reifying both Jewish and Palestinian ethno-nationalisms, could simply set up the bipolar rivalry.” But such a model may come to be viewed as preferable to a two-state arrangement or a single polity in which winner takes all—and loser loses all. In a perilous slide away from the two-state solution, the politics of accommodation and power sharing may prove to be the only viable alternative to endless war or brutal domination by one community over another. ■

A Current History Snapshot . . .



“While the mere fact that any agreement has been reached is unquestionably significant, given the history of profound enmity between Israelis and Palestinians, this agreement has little or no substantive value in and of itself. Since the accord was largely a matter of mood and atmospherics, there is always the danger of a disruption of the process it initiated if the public mood changes on either or both sides—[a] constant danger, in a conflict as volatile as this one.”

“A Palestinian View of the Accord with Israel”
Current History, February 1994
 Rashid Khalidi, University of Chicago