

Palestine: Two-state dreamers

If one state is impossible, why is Olmert so afraid of it?

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In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

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NAZARETH. If the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the world's most intractable, much the same can be said of the parallel debate about whether its resolution can best be achieved by a single state embracing the two peoples living there or by a division of the land into two separate states, one for Jews and the other for Palestinians.

The central argument of the two-staters is that the one-state idea is impractical and therefore worthless of consideration. Their rallying cry is that it is at least possible to imagine a consensus emerging behind two states, whereas Israelis will never accept a single state. The one-state crowd are painted as inveterate dreamers and time-wasters.

That is the argument advanced by Israel's only serious peace group, Gush Shalom. Here is the view of the group's indefatigable leader, Uri Avnery: "After 120 years of conflict, after a fifth generation was born into this conflict on both sides, to move from total war to total peace in a Single Joint State, with a total renunciation of national independence? This is total illusion."

Given Avnery's high-profile opposition to a single state, many in the international solidarity groups adopt the same position. They have been joined by an influential American intellectual, the philosopher Michael Neumann, who wrote the no-holds-barred book *The Case against Israel*. He appears to be waging a campaign to discredit the one-state idea too.

Recently in defence of two states, he wrote: "That Israel would concede a single state is laughable. ... There is no chance at all [Israelis] will accept a single state that gives the Palestinians anything remotely like their rights."

Unlike the one-state solution, according to Neumann and Avnery, the means to realising two states are within our grasp: the removal of the half a million Jewish settlers living in the occupied Palestinian territories.

Both believe that, were Israel to withdraw to the pre-1967 borders, it would be possible to create two real states. "A two-state solution will, indeed, leave Palestinians with a sovereign state, because that's what a two-state solution means," argues Neumann. "It doesn't mean one state and another non-state, and no Palestinian proponent of a two-state solution will settle for less than sovereignty."

There is something surprisingly naive about arguing that, just because something is called a two-state solution, it will necessarily result in two sovereign states. What are the minimum requirements for a state to qualify as sovereign, and who decides?

True, the various two-state solutions proposed by Ariel Sharon, Ehud Olmert and George Bush, and supported by most of the international community, would fail according to the two-staters' chief criterion: these divisions are not premised on the removal of all the settlers.

But an alternative two-state solution requiring Israel's withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders might still not concede, for example, a Palestinian army – equipped and trained by Iran? – to guard the borders of the West Bank and Gaza. Would that count? And how likely do the campaigners for two real states think it that Israel and the US would grant that kind of sovereignty to a Palestine state?

Importantly, Neumann and Avnery remind us that those with power are the ones who dictate solutions. In which case we can be sure that, when the time is right, Israel and its sponsor, the United States, will impose their own version of the two-state solution and that it will be far from the genuine article advocated by the two-state camp.

But let us return to the main argument: that the creation of two states is inherently more achievable and practical than the establishment of a single state. Strangely, however, from all the available evidence, this is not how it looks to Israel's current leaders.

Prime minister Ehud Olmert, for example, has expressed in several speeches the fear that, should the Palestinian population under Israeli rule — both in the occupied territories and inside Israel proper — reach the point where it outnumbers the Jewish population, as demographers expect in the next few years, Israel will be compared to apartheid South Africa. In his words, Israel is facing an imminent and powerful “struggle for one-man-one-vote” along the lines of the anti-apartheid movement.

According to Olmert, without evasive action, political logic is drifting inexorably towards the creation of one state in Israel and Palestine. This was his sentiment as he addressed delegates to the recent Herzliya conference:

“Once we were afraid of the possibility that the reality in Israel would force a bi-national state on us. In 1948, the obstinate policy of all the Arabs, the anti-Israel fanaticism and our strength and the leadership of David Ben-Gurion saved us from such a state. For 60 years, we fought with unparalleled courage in order to avoid living in a reality of bi-nationalism, and in order to ensure that Israel exists as a Jewish and democratic state with a solid Jewish majority. We must act to this end and understand that such a [bi-national] reality is being created, and in a very short while it will be beyond our control.”

Olmert's energies are therefore consumed with finding an alternative political programme that can be sold to the rest of the world. That is the reason he, and Sharon before him, began talking about a Palestinian state. Strangely, however, neither took up the offer of the ideal two-state solution — the kind Avnery and Neumann want — made in 2002. Then Saudi Arabia and the rest Arab world promised Israel peace in return for its withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders. They repeated their offer last year. Israel has steadfastly ignored them.

Instead an alternative version of two states — the bogus two-state solution — has become the default position of Israeli politics. It requires only that Israel and the Palestinians appear to divide the land, while in truth the occupation continues and Jewish sovereignty over all of historic Palestine is not only maintained but rubber-stamped by the international

community. In other words, the Gazafication of the West Bank.

When Olmert warns that without two states “Israel is finished”, he is thinking primarily about how to stop the emergence of a single state. So, if the real two-state camp is to be believed, Olmert is a dreamer too, because he fears that a one-state solution is not only achievable but dangerously close at hand. Sharon, it seems, suffered from the same delusion, given that demography was the main impulse for his disengaging from Gaza.

Or maybe both of them understood rather better than Neumann and Avnery what is meant by a Jewish state, and what political conditions are incompatible with it.

In fact, the division of the land demanded by the real two-staters, however equitable, would be the very moment when the struggle for Israel to remain a Jewish state would enter its most critical and difficult phase. Which is precisely why Israel has blocked any meaningful division of the land so far and will continue to do so.

In the unimaginable event that the Israel were to divide the land, a Jewish state would not be able to live with the consequences of such a division for long. Eventually, the maintenance of an ethnic Israeli state would (and will) prove unsustainable: environmentally, demographically and ultimately physically. Division of the land simply “fast-forwards” the self-destructiveness inherent in a Jewish state.

Let us examine just a few of the consequences for the Jewish state of a genuine two-state solution.

First, Israel inside its recognised, shrunken borders would face an immediate and very serious water shortage. That is because, in returning the West Bank to the Palestinians, Israel would lose control of the large mountain aquifers that currently supply most of its water, not only to Israel proper but also to the Jewish settlers living illegally in the occupied territories. Israel would no longer be able to steal the water, but would be expected to negotiate for it on the open market.

Given the politics of water in the Middle East that would be no simple matter. However impoverished the new sovereign Palestinian state was, it would lose all legitimacy in the eyes of its own population were it to sell more than a trickle of water to the Israelis.

We can understand why by examining the current water situation. At the moment Israel drains off almost all of the water provided by the rivers and aquifers inside Israel and in the occupied territories for use by its own population, allowing each Palestinian far less than the minimum amount he or she requires each day, according to the World Health Organisation.

In a stark warning last month, Israel’s Water Authority reported that overdrilling has polluted with sea water most of the supply from the coastal aquifer — that is the main fresh water source inside Israel’s recognised borders.

Were Palestinians to be allowed a proper water ration from their own mountain aquifer, as well as to build a modern economy, there would not be enough left over to satisfy Israel’s first-world thirst. And that is before we consider the extra demand on water resources from all those Palestinians who choose to realise their right to return, not to their homes in Israel, but to the new sovereign Palestinian state.

In addition, for reasons that we will come to, the sovereign Jewish state would have every reason to continue its Judaisation policies, trying to attract as many Jews from the rest of the world as possible, thereby further straining the region's water resources.

The environmental unsustainability of both states seeking to absorb large populations would inevitably result in a regional water crisis. In addition, should Israeli Jews, sensing water shortages, start to leave in significant numbers, Israel would have an even more pressing reason to locate water, by fair means or foul.

It can be expected that in a short time Israel, with the fourth most powerful army in the world, would seek to manufacture reasons for war against its weaker neighbours, particularly the Palestinians but possibly also Lebanon, in a bid to steal their water.

Water shortages would, of course, be a problem facing a single state too. But, at least in one state there would be mechanisms in place to reduce such tensions, to manage population growth and economic development, and to divide water resources equitably.

Second, with the labour-intensive occupation at an end, much of the Jewish state's huge citizen army would become surplus to defence requirements. In addition to the massive social and economic disruptions, the dismantling of the country's military complex would fundamentally change Israel's role in the region, damage its relationship with the only global superpower and sever its financial ties to Diaspora Jews.

Israel would no longer have the laboratories of the occupied territories for testing its military hardware, its battlefield strategies and its booming surveillance and crowd control industries. If Israel chose to fight the Palestinians, it would have to do so in a proper war, even if one between very unequal sides. Doubtless the Palestinians, like Hizbullah, would quickly find regional sponsors to arm and train their army or militias.

The experience and reputation Israel has acquired — at least among the US military — in running an occupation and devising new and supposedly sophisticated ways to control the "Arab mind" would rapidly be lost, and with it Israel's usefulness to the US in managing its own long-term occupation of Iraq.

Also, Israel's vital strategic alliance with the US in dividing the Arab world, over the issue of the occupation and by signing peace treaties with some states and living in a state of permanent war with others, would start to unravel.

With the waning of Israel's special relationship with Washington and the influence of its lobby groups, as well as the loss of billions of dollars in annual subsidies, the Jewish Diaspora would begin to lose interest in Israel. Its money and power ebbing away, Israel might eventually slip into Middle Eastern anonymity, another Jordan. In such circumstances it would rapidly see a large exodus of privileged Ashkenazi Jews, many of whom hold second passports.

Third, the Jewish state would not be as Jewish as some might think: currently one in five Israelis is not Jewish but Palestinian. Although in order to realise a real two-state vision all the Jewish settlers would probably need to leave the occupied territories and return to Israel, what would be done with the Palestinians with Israeli citizenship?

These Palestinians have been citizens for six decades and live legally on land that has belonged to their families for many generations. They are also growing in number at a rate faster than the Jewish population, the reason they are popularly referred to in Israel as a “demographic timebomb”.

Were these 1.3 million citizens to be removed from Israel by force under a two-state arrangement, it would be a violation of international law by a democratic state on a scale unprecedented in the modern era, and an act of ethnic cleansing even larger than the 1948 war that established Israel. The question would be: why even bother advocating two states if it has to be achieved on such appalling terms?

Assuming instead that the new Jewish state is supposed to maintain, as Israel currently does, the pretence of being democratic, these citizens would be entitled to continue living on their land and exercising their rights. Inside a Jewish state that had officially ended its conflict with the Palestinians, demands would grow from Palestinian citizens for equal rights and an end to their second-class status.

Most importantly, they would insist on two rights that challenge the very basis of a Jewish state. They would expect the right, backed by international law, to be able to marry Palestinians from outside Israel and bring them to live with them. And they would want a Right of Return for their exiled relatives on a similar basis to the Law of Return for Jews.

Israel’s Jewishness would be at stake, even more so than it is today from its Palestinian minority. It can be assumed that Israel’s leaders would react with great ferocity to protect the state’s Jewishness. Eventually Israel’s democratic pretensions would have to be jettisoned and the full-scale ethnic cleansing of Palestinian citizens implemented.

Still, do these arguments against the genuine two-state arrangement win the day for the one-state solution? Would Israel’s leaders not put up an equally vicious fight to protect their ethnic privileges by preventing, as they are doing now, the emergence of a single state?

Yes, they would and they will. But that misses my point. As long as Israel is an ethnic state, it will be forced to deepen the occupation and intensify its ethnic cleansing policies to prevent the emergence of genuine Palestinian political influence — for the reasons I cite above and for many others I don’t. In truth, both a one-state and a genuine two-state arrangement are impossible given Israel’s determination to remain a Jewish state.

The obstacle to a solution, then, is not about dividing the land but about Zionism itself, the ideology of ethnic supremacism that is the current orthodoxy in Israel. As long as Israel is a Zionist state, its leaders will allow neither one state nor two real states.

The solution, therefore, reduces to the question of how to defeat Zionism. It just so happens that the best way this can be achieved is by confronting the illusions of the two-state dreamers and explaining why Israel is in permanent bad faith about seeking peace.

In other words, if we stopped distracting ourselves with the Holy Grail of the two-state solution, we might channel our energies into something more useful: discrediting Israel as a Jewish state, and the ideology of Zionism that upholds it. Eventually the respectable façade of Zionism might crumble.

Without Zionism, the obstacle to creating either one or two states will finally be removed. And if that is the case, then why not also campaign for the solution that will best bring justice to both Israelis and Palestinians?

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