

As a 2-State Solution Loses Steam, a 1-State Plan Gains Traction

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

Some Israeli and Palestinian leaders are now pressing for a single state, but their views of what that state would look like are mutually exclusive.

FULL TEXT

JERUSALEM —The Israeli right, emboldened by President Trump’ s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’ s capital, is not the only faction arguing for a single state between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

The Palestine Liberation Organization has also begun to ask whether that might not be such a bad idea, though it has a radically different view of what that state would look like.

As momentum ebbs for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, both sides are taking another look at the one-state idea. But that solution has long been problematic for both sides.

For the Israelis, absorbing three million West Bank Palestinians means either giving up on democracy or accepting the end of the Jewish state. The Palestinians, unwilling to live under apartheid-like conditions or military occupation, have also seen two states as their best hope.

Now, for the first time since it declared its support for a Palestinian state side-by-side with Israel in 1988, the P.L.O. is seriously debating whether to embrace fallback options, including the pursuit of a single state.

“It’ s dominating the discussion,” said Mustafa Barghouti, a physician who sits on the P.L.O.’ s central council, which is to take up possible changes to the national movement’ s strategy later this month.

Palestinian supporters envision one state with equal rights for Palestinians and Jews. Palestinians would have proportionate political power and, given demographic trends, would before long be a majority, spelling the end of the Zionist project.

That outcome is unacceptable to the Israeli right wing, which is pressing to annex the land on the occupied West Bank where Jewish settlers have built communities while consigning Palestinians to the areas where they live now. Israeli proponents of these ideas freely acknowledge that the Palestinian areas would be considerably less than a state, at least to start: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has even called it a “state-minus.” Eventually, they say, the Palestinians could achieve statehood in a confederation with Jordan or Egypt, as part of Israel, or perhaps even independently —but not soon.

Both sides have long officially supported the idea of a two-state solution to the conflict while accusing the other of harboring designs on the whole territory. But Mr. Trump’ s Jerusalem declaration last month changed the calculus. The Trump administration has not endorsed a one-state solution, and it is working on its own peace plan , insisting that any final agreement, including borders, be negotiated by the two sides. But last month’ s decision by the president to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’ s capital, in defiance of a decades-old United States policy and international consensus and with no mention of a Palestinian claim on the city, was seen as putting his thumb on the Israeli side of the scale.

Saeb Erekat, the veteran Palestinian negotiator, said that Mr. Trump’ s declaration was the death knell for the two-state solution and that Palestinians should shift their focus to “one state with equal rights.” His position has since gained traction among the Palestinian leadership.

Under that idea, the Palestinian movement would shift to a struggle for equal civil rights, including the freedoms of movement, assembly and speech, and the right to vote in national elections. “Which could mean a Palestinian could be the prime minister,” Mr. Barghouti said.

To its Palestinian supporters, the one-state idea is bitter consolation after decades of striving for statehood under the Oslo peace accords, which many believe has achieved little aside from providing cover, and buying time, for Israel to expand settlements.

“When you support the two-state solution, you’re supporting Netanyahu,” said As’ad Ghanem, a political science lecturer at the University of Haifa who has been working with a group of Israelis and Palestinians on a one-state strategy for some time. “It is time for us Palestinians to present an alternative.”

Several efforts are underway. A decade-old group called the Popular Movement for One Democratic State, led by Radi Jarai, a former Fatah leader who served 12 years in prison in Israel after helping to lead the 1987 intifada, is planning a media campaign to explain the idea to West Bank residents.

“They think it means Palestinians will take the Israeli ID and live under an apartheid regime,” he said. “But our idea is to have one democratic state, with no privilege for the Jews or for any other ethnic or religious group.”

Others are talking about drafting a prototype constitution for a single state or forming a political party in Israel and on the West Bank to push for it.

“At least 30 percent of Palestinians support one-state when no one is talking about it,” said Hamada Jaber, an organizer of a group called the One State Foundation. “If there’s at least one political party on each side that will talk about it and adapt this strategy, the support will grow.”

The idea has stronger support among the young, said Khalil Shikaki, a Palestinian pollster, particularly students and professionals who have clamored for a change in strategy since the Arab spring in 2011.

“I’m 24,” said Mariam Barghouti, a writer and activist involved in one of the one-state efforts, and a distant relation of Mr. Barghouti. “All I’ve known is Oslo and the two-state negotiation process. I’ve witnessed how it’s only gotten worse for me and my generation.”

To the Israeli right, abandoning the two-state goal is a good thing, a long-term threat averted. Many look at Gaza, from which Israel unilaterally withdrew in 2005, and imagine a Palestinian state on the West Bank similarly overtaken by the militant Hamas organization, with rockets raining down on Ben-Gurion airport from the east, instead of on farms and schoolyards from the south.

But the Israeli right has not fully explained how its single state overcomes the demographic conundrum. Absorbing the nearly three million Palestinians on the West Bank would either spell the end of a Jewish state or destroy Israeli democracy if Palestinians were denied equal rights. Even a slim Jewish majority would be politically unable to deny Palestinians full citizenship and rights in a single sovereign state.

“I would never give citizenship to the masses of the Arab population in Judea and Samaria,” said Yoav Kisch, a member of Parliament from Mr. Netanyahu’s party who is advancing one autonomy plan, using the biblical names for the West Bank.

Eventually, he said, what’s left of the Palestinian areas could become part of Jordan or Egypt, or become some kind of “state-minus” with limited sovereignty. In the meantime, Mr. Kisch said, he would be willing to give full Israeli citizenship to only about 30,000 West Bank Palestinians who live in areas where he wants Israel to assert sovereignty. Such a move would be unacceptable to the Palestinians.

What these two sharply different one-state visions share is a conviction that a two-state solution is out of reach.

To be sure, the P.L.O. is not giving up entirely on a two-state solution. It is still pursuing other diplomatic avenues. On Friday, for example, Mr. Erekat called on Arab League member states to act on past commitments to cut ties with any country that recognizes Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.

“We realize we have to be careful to make sure that the world does not misunderstand us,” Mr. Barghouti said in an interview. “If the two-state solution dies, it will be the responsibility of Israel, not the Palestinians. But if the Israelis kill it, which they’re in the process of doing now, unfortunately with the help of Trump’s administration, then the only option will be for us to fight the apartheid system and bring it down, which means one state with equal rights for

everybody.”

And there is skepticism among both Palestinians and Israelis that Palestinian leaders like Mr. Erekat and Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority, would ever truly abandon the Oslo process, to which they have devoted their careers and to which they owe their livelihoods.

If and when a more liberal Israeli government is elected, it could also revive a two-state peace process.

But the costs and political difficulty of withdrawing Israelis from the West Bank grow with every settler family that moves in.

Daniel C. Kurtzer, a Princeton professor who was ambassador to Egypt in the Clinton administration and to Israel under George W. Bush, noted that about 120,000 Palestinian workers commuted to Israel every day, the Palestinian security services provided help to Israel in protecting its own population and the Palestinian Authority’s administration relieved Israel of the occupying power’s obligation to care for refugees.

“You and I will say, ‘It’ ll never happen, they’ ll come to their senses,’ ” Mr. Kurtzer said. “But how long can you live with the status quo? We’ re going to wake up one day and it’ s going to be effectively one state. It’ s like ‘Thelma and Louise.’ You’ re going down the highway and life is great. But there’ s a cliff.”

Credit: David M. Halbfinger

DETAILS

Subject:	Diplomatic & consular services; Political parties; Apartheid; Citizenship; Democracy; Prime ministers; Sovereignty; Equal rights; Palestinian people; Jewish people
Location:	Israel; Samaria; Jerusalem Israel; Egypt; West Bank; United States--US; Mediterranean Sea; Gaza Strip; Jordan River
People:	Trump, Donald J; Abbas, Mahmoud (Abu Mazen); Bush, George W; Netanyahu, Benjamin
Company / organization:	Name: League of Arab States; NAICS: 813940; Name: Palestinian National Authority; NAICS: 921190; Name: Hamas; NAICS: 813940; Name: Palestine Liberation Organization--PLO; NAICS: 813940; Name: University of Haifa; NAICS: 611310
Identifier / keyword:	Israel; Palestinians; United States International Relations; Trump, Donald J
Publication title:	New York Times (Online); New York
Publication year:	2018
Publication date:	Jan 5, 2018
Section:	world
Publisher:	New York Times Company
Place of publication:	New York
Country of publication:	United States, New York
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States

e-ISSN: 15538095

Source type: Blog, Podcast, or Website

Language of publication: English

Document type: News

ProQuest document ID: 1985123069

Document URL: <http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/nytimes/blogs-podcasts-websites/as-2-state-solution-loses-steam-1-plan-gains/docview/1985123069/sem-2?accountid=35635>

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Last updated: 2021-12-16

Database: New York Times

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