



Progressive Issue Brief

Why One Binational State is Not the Answer to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Prepared as part of TTN's Boston & New England Initiative for
Progressive Academic Engagement with Israel and Palestine



The Third Narrative (TTN) is an initiative of Ameinu

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Supporters of one state from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea include anti-Zionists who reject Jewish self-determination and right wing Zionists who embrace the idea of Greater Israel. But there are also more moderate members of the one-state camp whose arguments are increasingly difficult to refute: progressives who once had high hopes for the Oslo peace process, and now believe time has run out for a viable Palestinian state. They say it is time to accept the current “one-state reality,” give up on the two-state goal and start to fight for equal rights for Palestinians and Israelis in a single shared polity. We disagree.

The outlook for two states is indeed grim. A contiguous Palestinian state that is not a collection of disconnected Bantustans seems less likely with each passing day. Jewish settlements in the West Bank are entrenched and growing, and the Israeli public lacks the political will to do anything about them. Current Israeli and Palestinian leaders seem incapable of conducting productive negotiations that could bridge the gaps between the parties.

But those who want to help end the occupation, suffering and injustice need to ask themselves: which outcome are both peoples more likely to accept, one state or two? Which goal can be the basis of a practical political program? Which end result would be more just, more stable, more fair?

The answer is still a two-state solution.

ONE STATE WOULD PERPETUATE INEQUALITY AND VIOLENCE

Even if we pretend, for the sake of argument, that the obstacles to one state are not insurmountable, implementing that solution would not change the current asymmetry of power and resources.. As longtime Israeli leftwing leader Uri Avnery explains:

Let's examine this state, not as an imaginary entity, the epitome of perfection, but as it would be in reality. In this state, the Israelis will be dominant. They currently enjoy superiority in practically all spheres: quality of life, military power and technological capabilities. The annual income of an average Israeli is 25 times that of an average Palestinian: \$20,000 as opposed to \$800. The Israelis will see to it that the Palestinians will be the hewers of wood and the drawers of water for a long, long time.

It will be an occupation by other means. It will not end the conflict, but open another phase. (1)

Opting for a binational state instead of a negotiated separation would also be an open invitation to the kind of horrific violence that erupted in the fall of 2015, when stabbings and shootings spread from East Jerusalem to the rest of the Palestinian territories and Israel proper.

In light of that violence, and the fear, mistrust and anger that have increased as a result of it, Amos Oz's argument against a binational state is a powerful one. He explains, “After one hundred years of blood,

tears and disasters, it is impossible to expect Israelis and Palestinians to jump suddenly into a double bed and begin a honeymoon. In 1945, if someone had suggested uniting Poland and Germany into one binational state, he would probably have been locked up in an insane asylum.”(2)

That is why Oz, like many other Israeli leftists who staunchly oppose the occupation, continues to call for “a fair divorce. After a time, perhaps cooperation will come, a common market, a federation. But in the initial stage, the country must be a two-family home.”(3)

NO PLAUSIBLE PATH

Avnery argues that the only plausible way to achieve one state in which Israelis and Palestinians on both sides of the Green Line vote in the same elections is to impose it by force:

Anyone connected with the Jewish Israeli public knows that the desire for a state with a Jewish majority, where the Jews are masters of their own fate, trumps all other aims, even the desire for a state in all of Eretz Israel...

There is an illusion that this can be changed through external pressure. Will outside pressure compel 99.9% of the Jewish public to give up the state? No, nothing but a crushing military defeat will compel the Israelis to give up their state.(4)

Too many one-state supporters, especially on the anti-Zionist left, refuse to confront what it is going to take to realize their ambitions. Some live in a “subjective fantasy world in which Israel is detached from its specifically Jewish roots and then miraculously destroyed by the political equivalent of remote control, free of any violence or bloodshed under the banner of anti-racism,” according to Philip Mendes and Nick Dyrenfurth.(5)

The sensitivities of people who bear intense psychic scars from their families’ histories of persecution should not be underestimated when proposing a solution that might look reasonable to outsiders. That applies to Jews as well as Arabs.

Many Israelis are the children and grandchildren of people who desperately needed a place of refuge and found their way to the only state in the world where Jews were not a minority. To expect current Israeli Jews to revert again to minority status is to expect them, as Hussein Ibish puts it, to willingly “let bygones be bygones, forgo their national identities and join the vanguard of enlightened humanity transcending the most fundamental of modern identity categories.”(6) Neither Palestinians nor Israelis can afford to wait for that to happen or to base their hopes on speculative fantasies.

A UTOPIAN VISION

Some theoreticians, like Ali Abunimah, claim that Jewish national expression would be possible in a binational state. He envisions a state where “you have one person, one vote, full democracy, full equality, while at same time, ethnic communities, the Israeli-Jewish community, the Palestinian community, will have mechanisms for expressing their national identity, for decision making over issues that concern them.”(7)

At first glance, that vision might be appealing to those who want to end the occupation and Jewish-Arab inequality. But Alexander Yakobson and Amnon Rubinstein note that, for a binational state to retain any kind of Jewish character:

(A) number of wildly implausible assumptions need to be made: that the Arab-Palestinian people would agree...to be the only one among the Arab peoples whose state would not be officially Arab, would not be a member of the Arab League and would not share, by declaration, the aspirations for Arab unity; and that the Palestinian Arabs would agree to make this concession—a declared relinquishing of Palestine’s ‘Arabness’...for the sake of the Jews, widely considered ‘foreign intruders’ and ‘colonialist invaders’ in Palestine.(8)

TWO STATES ARE STILL POSSIBLE

But aren’t two states equally implausible? No, not even close. Ibish asserts:

At some point a two state agreement could become practically impossible, although this has not yet occurred. The moment at which such a state of “impossibility...” will emerge is, contrary to many arguments by one-state advocates, not the function of a critical mass of administrative, topographical and infrastructural changes constructed by Israel in the occupied territories. Rather, it is that moment when a critical mass of Israelis and Palestinians become convinced that such a peace agreement is no longer feasible or desirable.(9)

Assaf Sharon gives another reason why the settlement enterprise is not irreversible:

The complicity of the Israeli government in the settlements, often noted by partition’s detractors, undermines the irreversibility thesis...Nearly every West Bank company and service, from public transport and telecommunications to health care and banking, functions under Israeli statutes or military decrees, which can be rescinded just as easily as they were enacted....Dismantling this state-enabled infrastructure would render life in the settlements practically impossible. The settlements are reversible precisely because they are—and always have been—a state project.(10)

Are the major compromises and changes necessary for a two-state solution likely to be agreed upon and implemented? Not in the near future, for a host of reasons too numerous to name here. Are two states still possible? Absolutely. Israeli and Palestinian political currents shift frequently, as do international political trends. Key political leaders in Israel and Palestine, the Arab world, the EU and the U.S. have not given up on a negotiated solution that will yield two states for two peoples, living side by side in peace.

Polls indicate that support for two states is dwindling among Israelis and Palestinians, who understandably despair in the absence of tangible and visible steps towards a negotiated solution. Despite this, only a small minority opts for the one-state goal. According to a poll taken in September 2015, 69% of Palestinians opposed “a one-state solution in which Arabs and Jews enjoy equal rights,” while only 30% endorsed it. Keep in mind that leftists in the West who promote the one-state idea are going against the will of the Palestinians they purport to support. Like Oz, most Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip want a divorce from Israelis, not a painful, volatile marriage.

As Ayman Odeh, the Palestinian Israeli leader of the Joint List in the Knesset, says:

There is no other realistic solution than the two-state solution. Now that we’ve struggled for so long we are not going to leave it without trying to solve it. This is also a moral issue. I can’t expect the people starving in Gaza to just wait until the conditions are right for one state. (11)

Despite many daunting obstacles, practical leftists in the West should do what they can to support diplomatic efforts to achieve two states. Of equal importance, they should help Palestinians and Jews working cooperatively on the ground in Israel and Palestine to galvanize the public support and political will needed to achieve that goal.

About The Third Narrative

The Third Narrative is an educational initiative that supports Israelis and Palestinians who are working to end the occupation, create a two-state solution and stop discrimination against Arab citizens of Israel. We believe that the truth about Israel and Palestine is rarely black and white; it resides in a gray area to which advocates on either side rarely venture. That is where we try to go, with original materials that address the common claims of both the anti-Israel far left and the pro-settlement far right. The Third Narrative is an initiative of Ameinu, a North American progressive Zionist organization that supports social justice in Israel, the Palestinian territories, the US and Canada. See <http://www.thirdnarrative.org>.

1. Uri Avnery, "One State: Solution or Utopia?" Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics and Culture Vol. 14, No. 2, 2007 (<http://www.pij.org/details.php?id=1065>).
2. Amos Oz, "Amos Oz Has a Recipe for Saving Israel," Haaretz 13 March 2015 (<http://www.haaretz.com/israelnews/.premium-1.646562>).
3. Ibid.
4. Avnery, Op. Cit.
5. Nick Dyrenfurth and Philip Mendes, Boycotting Israel Is Wrong: The Progressive Path towards Peace between Palestinians and Israeli (NewSouth, May 2015).
6. Hussein Ibish, What's Wrong With The One State Agenda (American Task Force On Palestine, 2009).
7. Ali Abunimah, "Ali Abunimah discusses the potential for 'One Country' in Palestine," The Electronic Intifada 28 November 2006 (<https://electronicintifada.net/content/ali-abunimah-discusses-potential-one-country-palestine/9604>).
8. Alexander Yakobson and Amnon Rubinstein, Israel and the Family of Nations: The Jewish Nation-state and Human Rights (Routledge, 2009).
9. Ibish, Op. Cit.
10. Assaf Sharon, "Half a Loaf: In Israel and Palestine, Two States Are Still Better Than One," Boston Review 12 October 2015 (<http://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/assaf-sharon-israel-palestine-two-state>).
11. Ayman Odeh, comments to 2015 Americans for Peace Now study tour, from organizational email: "Next Israeli Gov't, More Settlers in East Jerusalem," May 6, 2015