

# The Return of “One State”: How “One State for Two Peoples” is Taking Root in the Palestinian Arena

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The concept of “one state” has existed in Palestinian thought alongside the “two-state vision” since the first days of the conflict with the Zionist movement. When the Palestinian Authority was established, the idea of one state was pushed aside, although it had been rooted in the Palestinian establishment for many decades (mainly in the “Palestinian democratic state” objective). However, in view of the multi-faceted crises besetting the Palestinian system in recent years, and at their heart an understanding of the difficulty of realizing the two-state vision, there has been a revival of the idea of one state. Unlike the past, when this debate was limited to an elite and fed by ideological and political considerations, today these matters are widely discussed, driven by practical and materialistic considerations – the desire for a stable life. Unplanned and unintentionally, the two-state vision is gradually moving toward a one-state reality, in which the inherent tensions between the two peoples stand to become more extreme and volatile.

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"You and I will say, 'It'll never happen, they'll come to their senses'...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 [a scene from the movie] *Thelma and Louise*. You're going down the highway and life is great. But there's a cliff."<sup>1</sup> These words of Dan Kurtzer, a seasoned American diplomat and former US ambassador to Israel and to Egypt, illustrate to a large extent the fundamental gap in the Israeli attempt to understand the challenges developing from the Palestinian arena. Most political and security elements in Israel operate at a fast rate. They are driven by the memory of past precedents (mainly the most traumatic ones) and focus on tracking ongoing developments, particularly in the political and military spheres. As a result, they are consistently poised to confront dramas such as waves of terror, popular uprisings, and chaos. However, the challenges that actually have the greatest effect on reality often develop in deep undercurrents and at a fairly low speed.

### The Idea of One State

The one-state scenario – in other words, one political entity in the entire territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea – is an example of a challenge that is hard to identify and interpret. The idea is not new, and has been around since the start of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In fact, for decades it has co-existed with the two-state vision, and at times was even the dominant idea, particularly in Palestinian circles. Moreover, this is not a monolithic idea, rather a broad and sometimes even polarized array of interpretations of what appears to be one concept. Among both Palestinians and Israelis the dominant interpretation stresses the uniqueness and hegemony of one group, and the suppression of the other to second class status (for example, the Hamas goal of establishing one Palestinian state with an Islamic character; the goal of Palestinian elements in the nationalist movement and the left wing movement to establish an Arab Palestinian state; or on the other hand, the desire of right wing elements in Israel to establish one state with a clear Jewish majority and character). The second interpretation of the term, which emphasizes partnership between the two peoples, has always had a much more limited appeal on both sides of the dividing line. In this context, the bi-national or federation model is most prominent.

In Israel, discussion of the one-state idea has been widespread among politicians and the public over the past decade, accompanied by some

serious thought about the character of such a future state. Left wing and centrist elements in Israeli politics regularly caution that one state may be a consequence of failure to advance the political process and generate serious ramifications, above all the loss of the Jewish majority. In contrast, it is described by many on the right as a welcome opportunity to promote Israel's national objectives. However, the Israeli debate consistently ignores the question of how the one-state solution is analyzed on the Palestinian side.

Among the Palestinians in recent years there has been growing interest in, discussion of, and to a large extent support for the idea of one state. The idea has gradually moved from the fringes of the debate to the center, accompanied by more serious collective examination than in the past. However, in many ways the current interpretation of the idea by the Palestinians departs significantly from the previous concept. First, the idea was formerly championed by a limited group of political and intellectual elites, contrary to the current situation in which it is gaining support among the general public (distinct from the current Palestinian leadership, which is still demonstrating a reserved approach to the subject). Second, past promotion of the idea was driven by ideological and strategic considerations, while today it rests largely on practical-material considerations, mainly the desire to preserve or improve the lives of the individual and the Palestinian collective. Third, the Palestinians previously defined the one-state idea in the framework of their hegemony over the entity (largely in the context of "one Palestinian democratic state"), while today there is significant readiness among many to be annexed to the State of Israel and to live – at least in the short term – under Jewish hegemony.

The growing support for the one-state concept among Palestinians is accompanied by a change in the nature of the struggle against Israel and with Israel: they are no longer satisfied with the demand to realize national rights and political independence, and now seek the implementation of civil rights and individual rights. Another new feature of the current struggle linked to the idea of one state is the growing connection between Palestinians on the West Bank and the Arab sector in Israel. The demand by Arabs in Israel for equality and full civil rights is accompanied by a growing aspiration to change the state's character, and at the margins there is even a call to implement the one-state objective throughout the territory of "historical Palestine" – an objective that could potentially become the axis of cooperation between Palestinians on both sides of the Green Line.

The change in the Palestinian attitude on the idea of one state derives from a combination of trends at the strategic level and developments at the social, economic, and cultural levels. At the strategic level there is a collective sense that the Palestinian national movement is currently at an all-time low, in view of several processes: the deep freeze in the political process as establishment of an independent state appears an increasingly remote possibility; the internal split between the governments in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which threatens the formation of a united Palestinian entity in the future; the growing alienation between the public and the two Palestinian leaderships, and the lack of public belief in their ability to achieve the goal of independence; the sidelining of the Palestinian issue from the focus of the regional and international agenda, due to preoccupation with matters perceived to be more important; and the severe crisis in relations between the Palestinians and the current United States administration. Consequently, there is a growing argument in the Palestinian discourse that all the strategies for realizing national objectives, and above all political negotiations, have been tried and failed. The talks were supposed to realize the vision of two states and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state within the 1967 borders – an objective that most Palestinians feel has dissipated over the years. Moreover, the common assumption among Palestinians today is that Israel does not intend to implement the two-state vision, and is actually working toward gradually and quietly absorbing the territories, and particularly the West Bank.

Along with despair over the two-state vision, the growing support for the idea of one state is fed by internal trends, representing a gradual change in the image of Palestinian society. Above all, there is the collective desire to retain a relatively stable standard of living (this stability has been particularly evident in the West Bank over the past decade); a widespread trend in many segments of the public toward de-ideologization and depoliticization, reflecting exhaustion after many years of violent conflict driven by revolutionary fighting slogans, which ultimately failed to achieve any Palestinian national objectives; the lessons from the severe decline that engulfed Arab societies in the region following the Arab Spring revolutions, and the fear of sharing this nadir; and the rise of the younger Palestinian generation, most of whom are concerned with personal fulfillment and development, and harbor suspicion and even alienation toward the sources of authority around them, including the Palestinian leadership. Collective interests have not disappeared entirely, but they are in the shadow of the

public attempt to examine an alternative to the two-state vision, which will provide a response to Palestinian national aspirations while securing material interests.

### **The Political Context**

Deep disappointment with the two-state vision and calls to examine the one-state alternative have been part of the political process from the start. In the second half of the 1990s these views were already expressed by leading Palestinian intellectuals and political and media figures. They dismissed the Oslo process as a failure and even as a threat to Palestinian national objectives, and called for the adoption of the one-state goal. It was argued that the Oslo process provided Israel with a fig leaf while it entrenched its control over the territories (particularly through the expansion of settlements and the Judaization of Jerusalem), and that it would not end with the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, far less the return of refugees. At the focus of the criticism was the claim that the Oslo process perpetuated a reality of cantons or bantustans (the term for the quasi-homelands for black inhabitants set up by the apartheid regime in South Africa). In this framework it was alleged that the Palestinians were being enclosed in “reservations” created for them by Israel – a process that can deliver security calm together with an opportunity to gradually take over most of the territory of “historic Palestine.”

Supporters of the one-state idea claim that it would give the Palestinians a solution to their current problems, as well as strategic opportunities. According to this approach, one state would bring unity among all the elements in the Palestinian arena that has been fragmented for decades (the West Bank, Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, and the Arab sector in Israel), and would eventually enable the full return of the refugees and Palestinian domination over the one state, as the demographic majority. Hussam Khader, a leader of the refugee sector in the West Bank and formerly one of the heads of Fatah in the Nablus area, claimed that the idea of one state, whether a state for all its citizens or a bi-national state, would create an opportunity for full realization of the return of the refugees – whereas within the framework of the Oslo process, prospects to realize this objective were highly limited.<sup>2</sup> Ali al-Jirbawi, formerly the Palestinian Authority Minister for Higher Education and Vice President of Bir Zeit University, insisted that he personally preferred the vision of two states, but when considering the choice between the emerging “state of cantons” and the idea of one state,

he was obliged to choose the latter alternative, although it was clear to him that it would be very difficult to achieve, particularly in view of the opposition of most of the Jewish public.<sup>3</sup>

The one-state idea has gained prominence in Palestinian political discourse over the last decade against a background of increasing despair over the possibility of achieving an independent state in view of the ongoing political crisis. This can be seen in the attitudes of senior officials of the Palestinian Authority who raised the subject – as a means of expressing their despair at the political stagnation, but often also as a threat to Israel of the “nightmare scenario” for both parties if the two-state vision fades. The Palestinians demonstrated their understanding of the deep-seated fears among the Jewish public of a change in the demographic balance that would endanger the Zionist enterprise and Israel’s ability to exist as a Jewish democratic state. In this context, the speech delivered by Abu Mazen at the UN General Assembly on September 20, 2017 was particularly striking. He warned that if the two-state dream were shattered, the Palestinians would demand “equal rights for all the residents of historic Palestine in the framework of one state.” He also claimed that “if the two state solution is destroyed by the creation of a situation where there is one state with two legal systems, apartheid...neither you nor we will have any other choice but continuation of the struggle and a demand for equal rights for all Palestinians in historic Palestine...that is not a threat, but a warning deriving from the fact that Israeli policy is dangerously undermining the two-state solution.”<sup>4</sup>

### **The Social-Public Context**

In contrast with the political level, where there are still reservations over the one-state idea, among the Palestinian public and particularly on the West Bank there seems to be growing interest in the idea. This trend does not reflect any enthusiasm or hopes for the future and lacks ideological depth or an orderly framework, but it chimes with a new desire for self-fulfillment, particularly among the younger generation. In the past, the Palestinians were more committed to self-sacrifice, patience, and putting the collective goal before individual interests. Circumstances today channel the public toward more practical, utilitarian ways of thinking, a rejection of ideas that seem unrealizable at present, and a focus on ways of improving the situation of both individuals and the group in the foreseeable future. All this

should be achieved without renouncing identity and national ambitions, but realizing them in a way that suits the current reality.

The trends described above are well reflected in Palestinian public opinion polls conducted in recent years. In September 2016, the Jerusalem Media & Communication Center (JMCC) surveyed about a thousand young people aged 15-29 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. They were asked: what is the best way to bring about political change? Fifty-two percent replied that the best way was to be a good citizen, and above all to study and work hard; 20 percent thought that the best way was to join a local civilian social organization; 13 percent – to participate in demonstrations; 10 percent – to join a political party; and 5 percent said that the best way was to carry out individual attacks. The survey also found that 54.5 percent of the young people defined unemployment as the central problem facing Palestinians; 10.7 believed that political crises were the main problem; about 10 percent pointed to low wages; 6.7 percent pointed to travel restrictions imposed on the Palestinians; and 3.2 percent pointed to very strict and restrictive social and cultural codes.<sup>5</sup> A survey by the AWRAD Institute (Arab World for Research and Development) illustrated the limited interest shown by the younger generation of Palestinians in political issues: 43 percent of participants could identify the founder of the PLO, while 73 percent could identify the founder of Facebook.<sup>6</sup>

Direct dialogue with the Palestinians, and in particular the younger generation, clearly shows the growing support for the one-state idea and the difference from attitudes to this idea in the past. Young people from all geographical areas and social sectors stated that material achievements and self-fulfillment were their main aspirations, no less than their continuing devotion to the realization of collective national objectives, which was sometimes equal to the former or even slightly greater. The most significant development in public Palestinian discourse on the one-state issue is shown by the clear understanding that implementation of this scenario in the current circumstances means annexation to Israel and acceptance of Israeli hegemony (at least in the first phase) – a scenario that many are prepared to accept in return for citizenship and full rights. The model for the Palestinians in the West Bank is the Arab sector in Israel, and their main desire is to acquire a blue Israeli ID card.<sup>7</sup>

The hold of the one-state idea on the Palestinian public also finds striking expression in opinion polls. Examination of the responses over the last two decades to the same question asked in the JMCC survey about the

degree of support for the two-state vision and the one-state idea reveals some interesting findings. In 2001, against the background of the al-Aqsa intifada (the "second intifada"), support for the two-state vision was in sharp retreat while support for the one-state idea climbed (to about 30 percent, the highest rate since the Oslo Accords were signed); over the next fifteen years and as hostilities with Israel ebbed, public support for two states grew stronger, while support for one state fell (10-15 percent). However, in recent years, as the crisis in the political process deepened, there was a return to the situation of twenty years earlier – less support for two states and more support for one state; an unprecedented low in public support for two states was recorded in September 2018, when 37.5 percent of respondents were in favor, while the idea of one state gained 30.3 percent support (similar to the level of support in 2001). On the West Bank the change was particularly strong, with support for two states standing at 37.1 percent (compared to 48 percent in February 2017), while support for one state was 31 percent (compared to 20.3 percent in February 2017).<sup>8</sup>

Similar findings emerged from the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR). The PCPSR surveys from the mid 1990s show that 80 percent of respondents supported the two-state goal, while 5 percent supported one state. By 2005, this ratio had shrunk to 70:20, and in 2015 it reached 50:30. This trend is particularly striking in a series of surveys over the last decade: in June 2008, 58 percent supported two states and 27 percent supported one state; in May 2009, the figures were 61 percent and 23 percent, respectively; in March 2010, 57 percent supported two states and 29 percent supported one state; by September 2016, 30.6 percent expressed support for the one-state idea; in August 2017, the two-state vision was supported by 53 percent and the one-state idea or annexation by Israel was supported by 21 percent; by January 2018 support for two states stood at 46 percent while 27 percent supported one state or annexation by Israel. In addition, all the surveys conducted by the Center since early 2015 until now indicate that a majority of about 60 percent of respondents believe that the vision of two states is not practical, particularly in view of the Jewish settlement project in the West Bank.<sup>9</sup> Thus it is clear that support for one state derives largely from the ongoing decline in the Palestinian public's faith in the hope for the two-state vision.

The growing public support for one state lacks an orderly framework to translate the existing energies into a political movement, replacing longings of the heart with practical steps. Indeed, organizational expression of public



support for the idea is very limited in the Palestinian system. Groups of public activists and thinkers who support the one-state solution have worked in recent years to establish an organizational framework for their activity, largely to recruit additional support among the public. Some of them maintain links with groups in Israel, mainly groups of intellectuals who share their support for the one-state idea. Prominent among these is the Popular Movement for One Democratic State on Historical Palestine, which was founded in May 2012 and has recruited tens of thousands of public activists, intellectuals, and academics, the vast majority also members of Fatah. The movement is headed by Radi al-Jara`i, who teaches political science at al-Quds University and was a prominent Fatah activist during the first intifada.

### **Uncharted and Inadvertent: How Will the One State be Realized?**

Many researchers, intellectuals, and media figures in Israel have argued in recent years that one state is not a potential future scenario, but rather a reality that is already emerging with no official planning or announcement. Historian Matti Steinberg claimed that in view of the gradual decline of the two-state paradigm, the concept of a bi-national situation in one space is taking hold, and this could be the “precedent for a de jure arrangement of a binational constitutional reality.”<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, the situation on the West Bank to a great extent reflects a widening of the contact line between the two populations. The territorial space – and with it the demographic weight – of Israeli settlement in the West Bank is increasing steadily around both towns and villages and is almost contiguous with Palestinian territorial space. Moreover, Israeli and Palestinian civilian infrastructures and economic spaces are experiencing increasing merger processes, which highlights the West Bank’s almost complete dependence on Israel, for example, regarding utilities (electricity and water, in particular), the importance of Israel’s tax rebates for the Palestinian Authority budget, Palestinian dependence on Israel in imports and exports, and the growing number of Palestinian workers employed in Israel and in West Bank settlements. All this is in addition

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to the complete dependence of West Bank Palestinians on Israel for all aspects of traffic within and to and from the area.

A one-state scenario will likely not be realized at one clear point in time, and also apparently not by virtue of an orderly decision, but out of the dynamics of becoming, an unconscious and unplanned "awakening" that in fact is already underway among both peoples. On the way to official establishment of the one state there will presumably be a number of important stations. The first could be the weakening of the central Palestinian government and the development of a fragile "state of cantons," instead of what should have been the basis of an independent Palestinian state. This stage could materialize, for example, following the departure of Abu Mazen from the political arena, leading to a situation of confusion, instability, and leadership struggles. The next stage could be the official Israeli annexation of all or part of the West Bank (such as Area C), which would blur the borders between the two entities and lead to the granting of partial or full residency or citizenship to Palestinians in the area. The third stage would probably be some form of apartheid, in view of Israel's basic unwillingness to "absorb" three million West Bank Palestinians as citizens with equal rights. Even now the Palestinians express the fear that the one-state reality (as distinct from an official one state) would mean the continuation of Israeli rule over the Palestinians by other means. Palestinian researcher Ra'if Zureiq maintains in this context that one state does not mean the end of the struggle and the resolution of Palestinian problems, since it is likely that Jewish hegemony would be retained ("a master-slave relationship"), and the Palestinians would be obliged to promote a broad-based demand for civil rights, while enlisting international support.<sup>11</sup>

However, strong internal tension in Israel, plus the internal Palestinian struggle together with heavy external pressure on Israel from the international arena, could ultimately lead to the fourth and last station – the official declaration of one state, in which all residents would be citizens with equal rights. This would probably be the start of a new historical chapter, which would not necessarily obliterate the tensions and hostility of the past, but might in fact reinforce them.

### **A Look to the Future**

With each day that the current situation continues, Israel and the Palestinians are moving toward translating the one-state idea into a reality. This trend is driven by despair, adjustment, loss of faith in other strategic options,

and a tendency of both sides to prefer nurturing the idea of here and now over continuation of the exhausting struggle and the ideologies of the past. This is particularly striking among the Palestinians, who seem to be moving toward the one-state situation due to a practical approach lacking any ideological dimension.

Nevertheless, the realization of one state is not expected to mark the end of the road, and certainly not of the struggle, but rather to signal the beginning of a new conflict, this time in the spirit of "balkanization," after the contact between the peoples has increased at all levels: institutional-governmental, economic, geographic, and demographic. At the same time, the idea of one state is not a determinist scenario, and there are still many difficulties and obstacles on the way to its possible realization – yet also possible exits that could develop from an understanding of the destructive future facing both people. Furthermore, a large portion of the Israeli and Palestinian publics are still opposed to the idea of one state, because of their wish to maintain national exclusivity. The Jews fear anything that undermines the Jewish character of Israel, and many Palestinians are aware that they will not be accepted as equal citizens by Israel and therefore want to establish a state with a clear Palestinian majority. The idea also encounters reservations among the international community, which continues to give overwhelming support to the vision of two states as the main formula for resolving the conflict. In general, therefore, the discourse around one state is accompanied by passivity and fear more than by a feeling of euphoria and hope.

In recent years Israel has shown greater awareness of the fragility of the Palestinian system and the possibility of internal developments within it that will quickly and extensively impact on the situation within Israel. The main concern in this context refers to immediate threats such as violent conflict, a third intifada, or the rapid breakup of the Palestinian Authority, accompanied by internal chaos and waves of terror. Yet it is possible that the real threat does not lie in the "explosion" that Israel has warned of for several years and that has yet to materialize, but rather in the quiet daily creep of the creation of a new and unfamiliar one-state reality. This is the deceptive calm that creates the illusion of being able to continue the existing arrangement for a long time, based on maintaining material stability. Ultimately, in the next few years this quiet process will lead to a situation where both peoples face a complex reality that they may have envisaged in general terms, but have never imagined in a concrete way.

Not only will this situation change the basic strategic conditions in which Israel operates, but it will also force it to conduct a profound debate about its nature and future as a Jewish and democratic state, and may even oblige it to change its basic characteristics.

This conclusion requires Israel to think deeply about the strategic options available to it in the Palestinian context in general, and in the West Bank in particular. The current reality is not likely to continue for any length of time, and stands to be challenged by possible changes in the Palestinian system (for example, consequences of the day after Abu Mazen) or in Israel (for example, implications of economic shockwaves in Israel for the Palestinian economy). Against this background, it is imperative that Israel weigh the range of strategic alternatives before it: from a coordinated arrangement between the sides – a preferred alternative for the sides, which is difficult to implement at this time – to a unilateral move in the West Bank. Above all, the central strategic purpose of any alternative that is chosen should be the prevention of the slide into the one-state scenario.

## Notes

- 1 David M. Halbfinger, "As a 2-State Solution Loses Steam, a 1-State Plan Gains Traction," *New York Times*, January 5, 2018.
- 2 Hussam Khader, "From al-Nakba to the One-State Solution," *Haq al-Awda* (Bethlehem), No. 17, May 2006.
- 3 Ali al-Jirbawi, "The Palestinian Impasse and the Only Way to Get Out of It," *al-Darasat al-Falastiniyya*, No. 58 (Spring 2004): 9-10.
- 4 Palestinian Television, September 20, 2017.
- 5 Survey no. 88, p. 24. The survey can be found on the Institute's website: [www.jmcc.org](http://www.jmcc.org).
- 6 The survey can be found on the Institute's website: [www.awrad.org](http://www.awrad.org).
- 7 See the impressions of this kind that emerged from meetings held by Avi Issacharoff in the town of Sa'ir in Mount Hebron (*Walla! News*, March 7, 2016), and in the Jenin refugee camp (*Walla! News*, January 15, 2016).
- 8 See all the surveys on the Center's website: [www.jmcc.org](http://www.jmcc.org).
- 9 See the Center's surveys over the years on its website: [www.pcpsr.org](http://www.pcpsr.org).
- 10 Matti Steinberg, "How the Palestinians Perceive and Accept the Idea of One State," lecture at the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, April 17, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dSXelPgW6U>.
- 11 Ra'if Zureiq, "The One-State Solution: From Struggle till Death to the Dialectic of Master and Slave," *al-Darasat al-Falastiniyya*, No. 86 (Spring 2011): 128-42.