

# **On the Course toward a Jewish-Palestinian One-State Reality**

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**The move away from the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, whether intentional or inadvertent, accelerates a trend of sliding toward a one-state reality. However, the assumption that after decades of conflict and bloodshed the two peoples can live together belies common sense. In the context of sliding toward one state, three scenarios, which can be dubbed “gray rhinos,” are galloping toward us, as we are ignore their dangerous approach: the creation of a mixed and intertwined way of life for Jews and Palestinians that cannot be untangled or separated; a political deadlock that is unable to breach the impasse and realize the options for a political settlement; and the creation of a reality that undermines the Zionist vision of a democratic, secure, and thriving Jewish state. This article describes a one-state reality, with the tension and violent events in the united Jerusalem illustrating the problematic situation that stands to emerge.**

Israel's fifth election in the last two and a half years has ended, without a debate on the future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, apart from how to deal with rising Palestinian terror. A string of developments over the years – repeated failures to achieve a permanent status agreement; the split in the Palestinian camp between Fatah and Hamas; entrenchment of the Israeli narrative about the lack of a Palestinian partner for an agreement; waves of terror and violent clashes – have all led the public in Israel, like its decision makers, to lose faith in the possibility of reaching an agreement on the Israeli-Palestinian dispute in the spirit of the two-state idea. Israeli governments – hard pressed to take difficult decisions, implement them, and survive – try to buy time and achieve calm in the conflict arena for as long as possible. But the absence of progress toward a settlement and the blind commitment to “conflict management” increase the complexity of the situation until it will no longer be possible to shape a settlement of two entities, Jewish and Palestinian, distinct and separate – politically, geographically, and demographically. This means a threat to the character of Israel as a Jewish, democratic, secure, and thriving state.

This article analyzes the threat embodied in this said outcome, based on the current situation in Jerusalem – a model for integrating the Jewish and Palestinian populations in one framework.

### **Current Trends**

The Israeli public has lost faith in the possibility of formulating and implementing an agreement with the official Palestinian representation, if indeed that exists, and displays indifference to the situation emerging on the ground. The Palestinian public has also lost faith in the political approach, is swept into acts of terror and violence (in the last two years there has been a significant increase in attacks in the West Bank and Jerusalem), and evinces growing interest in a one-state solution, with full rights for the Palestinian population.

Against this background, in recent years there has been noticeable enthusiasm, particularly among politicians, for the idea of “shrinking the conflict,” which means continuing to manage the conflict below the threshold of war, while improving the fabric of life for the Palestinian population but without examining the assumption that it is possible to suppress Palestinian national aspirations and the desire of the Palestinian public for full civic rights. Like the “economic peace” idea, the idea of “shrinking the conflict” is another way of buying time and postponing serious decisions that grapple with striving for a settlement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, time is a crucial vector in the slow, almost unnoticeable, slide into a reality of one state between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River.

Even those who cling to the idea of “shrinking the conflict” fear two existential threats: (1) the creation of one binational state; (2) the creation of a Palestinian state, in which it is highly likely that the Palestinian state will be chaotic and act as a platform for terror against Israel. The problematic aspects of both these possibilities deter the decision makers from grappling with the challenge of the conflict.

However, a string of decisions by Israeli governments were taken without examination of their long-term consequences in terms of the trend toward a slide into a one-state reality. While there are few among Israeli society, either on the right or the left, that openly support one state, the political reality and the absence of any other political vision tend to reinforce this trend. This dynamic includes the construction of thousands of housing units in the West Bank, mostly in settlements outside the large blocs and east of the security barrier, and approval of unauthorized outposts. All these do not help to calm the percolating discontent among the Palestinians, but rather heighten the complexity between the two populations – Jewish and Palestinian – in the area, and in fact seem designed to

frustrate any possibility of Israel's separation from the Palestinians. In addition, entry permits for 120,000 Palestinian workers to work in Israel increases Palestinian dependence on Israel and the Palestinian burden on Israel. Moreover, some 40,000 Palestinians remain in Israel without permits, exploiting the gaps in the now hole-ridden security fence, which was built at a cost of over 20 billion shekels.

### **What Will "One Binational State" between the Mediterranean and the Jordan Look Like?**

Already with the renewal of Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel, the leaders of the Zionist movement assigned much weight to the demographic dimension. The leadership agreed to the idea of dividing the land into two states for two peoples, while preserving Jewish identity and the Jewish majority within the borders of the State of Israel. Today, the number of Jews in the territory of Mandatory Israel-Palestine – from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea (including the Gaza Strip) – is equal to the number of Arabs.

Is there a chance that two populations of equal size (or with a ratio of 60 percent Jews to 40 percent Palestinians, without the Gaza Strip), who have been engaged for many years in an ethnic, national, and religious conflict, who both claim ownership of the same piece of land, with Jerusalem as its capital, will be able to live together?

In order for two societies to live in harmony, two essential conditions must be met: (1) full civic equality; (2) full cooperation and mutual trust. More specifically, road acceptance among both peoples of a one-state reality hinges on agreement on all of the characteristics of the shared sovereignty – its constitution, economy, social aspects, and security. How is it possible to persuade Jewish Israelis to give up the idea of the Jewish state in return for a binational democracy, after 74 years of independence and bloody wars? Will the citizens of Israel be willing to accept the expected considerable drop in per capita GDP (from \$51,500 per annum to \$34,500 per annum)?<sup>1</sup> Will the Jewish public agree to equate the terms of the Law of Return to include the "right of return" of Palestinian refugees to the territory of Israel? Or alternatively, will the Israeli public agree to renounce the democratic character of the state and live in a state where the non-Jewish population do not enjoy full citizenship? And will the Palestinian residents agree to these terms, where their neighbors have more rights?

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<sup>1</sup> These figures are based on an economic analysis carried out at the Institute for National Security Studies by Dr. Haggay Etkes and Professor Esteban Klor.

In light of a sober examination of the conditions prevailing in both societies – the intensity of the mutual hostility, indifference to the suffering of the other side, the absence of any meaningful desire for reconciliation and coexistence, and the long years of Palestinian aspirations for self-determination – it is hard not to conclude that it is unreasonable, if not impossible, to expect the two societies to live together. Moreover, the single state will not be a functional state.

In order to understand the one-state reality, we examined the possible scenarios and challenges of such a situation. In most scenarios, there was severe friction between the two populations. The Palestinians were not satisfied with the initial changes and demanded absolute equality of rights, as well as the elimination of the socioeconomic gaps (including social status, education, welfare, and more). They continued to harbor feelings of deprivation and blamed the Jewish side for their condition, and these feelings contributed to violence and crime. Therefore, the conclusion is that the hostility between the peoples will grow stronger if the Palestinians become part of a single state with a Jewish identity, with no validation of their national Palestinian identity. In addition, even in a state without one defined identity – Jewish or Palestinian – these feelings and tendencies will continue.

Indeed, the intolerable daily violence between Jews and Palestinians was the basic reason for the decision to partition the land in United Nations Resolution 181 of 1947. It is fascinating to see how the conclusions of the Peel Commission, published in 1937, are still valid. The Commission's report stated: "An irrepressible conflict has arisen between two national communities within the narrow bounds of one small country....There is no common ground between them....They differ in religion and in language. Their cultural and social life, their ways of thought and conduct, are as incompatible as their national aspirations. These last are the greatest bar to peace."<sup>2</sup> It would be absurd to assume that decades of bloody conflict – including wars, terror attacks, and military campaigns, 55 years of Israeli military control of the Palestinian population, violent Palestinian uprisings and a war of terror, and countless clashes – have blunted the validity of this conclusion.

If indeed the expected developments materialize in a one-state situation, the establishment of such a state will not prevent a violent Palestinian uprising, or an uprising of Jews who refuse to accept the new reality. There are therefore two options: one is political separation – into two geographically and demographically separate and distinct entities; the second is the granting of full and equal rights to

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<sup>2</sup> The Peel Commission was a Royal Commission set up in August 1936 by the Government of the United Kingdom in order to investigate the causes of the large Arab revolt in the Land of Israel under the rule of the British Mandate, and to recommend future steps. <https://unispal.un.org/pdfs/Cmd5479.pdf>

Palestinians in the one state. Among the implications of granting full and equal rights to the Palestinians: they will be able to live wherever they please within the borders of the State of Israel; there will be a mass return of Palestinian refugees; they will have equal rights to vote and stand for election to the Knesset; and the government will consist of Jews and Palestinians. This government will pass laws to benefit the Palestinians and may even change the symbols of the state.

The one-state reality would ostensibly benefit the Israeli settlements and outposts in the West Bank, since their residents would be able to continue living there with no fear of evacuation. However, most of the settlements were built on “state land,” and sometimes on private Palestinian land, where the Israeli legal system and civilian administration approved the expropriation of Palestinian land for settlement purposes. In a one-state situation, state lands will also be designated for use to meet the needs of the Palestinian population, and it will no longer be possible to use private Palestinian land for the purpose of Jewish settlement. The Palestinian towns and villages will probably spread and even surround the Jewish settlements, thus increasing the friction between the populations and encouraging more crime and violence than already exists. The next stage will be Palestinian demands to cancel the law of absentee landlords’ assets, and claims for restitution of real estate in Jerusalem, Haifa, Jaffa, Ramla, Lod, and other cities, towns, and villages where Palestinians lived before the establishment of the State of Israel.

### **Jerusalem as a Case Study for a One-State Reality**

Jerusalem offers a case study for life in a one-state framework. In 1967 the government of Israel applied Israeli law over East Jerusalem, thus annexing the eastern section and in effect creating “one city for two peoples.” The residents of East Jerusalem are defined as permanent residents, with an Israeli ID and the right to vote in elections for the head of the Jerusalem municipality, as well as the right to apply for Israeli citizenship, which grants them an Israeli passport and the right to vote for the Knesset. At present, the bureaucracy of the Interior Ministry tries to delay as much as possible permits to a growing number of East Jerusalem applications for Israeli citizenship. Palestinians in East Jerusalem have boycotted elections in the city on the instructions of the PLO leaders and the Palestinian Authority. This move is designed to prevent recognition of Israeli sovereignty in the city. However, there have recently been calls to Palestinians in Jerusalem to vote for the city council, and to increase the number of applications for citizenship. If this scenario is realized, East Jerusalem Arabs will hold over a third of the seats on the local council and play a central role in determining Jerusalem’s policies and even selecting the mayor. Note that over the past 55 years, the Jewish majority in

Jerusalem has shrunk from 74 percent to only 60 percent (the figures show that about 530,000 Jews have left the city, while only 325,000 Jews have moved there).<sup>3</sup>

An analysis of the socioeconomic situation of Jerusalem shows that over 55 years of Israeli rule of the united city, the gaps between the Jewish and Palestinian population have deepened. The extent of poverty in the city, 43 percent of all residents in 2022, is considerably higher than the level of poverty in the country as a whole – 21 percent. Moreover, the percentage of Jewish residents of Jerusalem whose income is below the poverty line is 32 percent, which is about half of the level of poverty among the city's Arab population, 61 percent.<sup>4</sup>

The State of Israel has recognized that the infrastructure, social, and economic gaps between the residents of East Jerusalem and the Jewish residents of the city are a source of frustration and hostility for the Palestinians and have security implications. Therefore, in May 2018 the government introduced a plan to halt the widening rifts, at an estimated cost of two billion shekels (Government Resolution no. 3790).<sup>5</sup> But already about a year after the introduction of the plan, a report from the State Comptroller stated that the relevant institutions in Israel must take urgent action to improve the socioeconomic condition of the East Jerusalem population and allocate additional budgets for this purpose.<sup>6</sup>

A central issue in Jerusalem, which is relevant also in the one-state scenario and would continue to be a source of friction and tension, is the struggle for control of the Temple Mount / al-Haram al-Sharif and al-Aqsa Mosque at its center. Young Arabs from East Jerusalem have formulated an identity and mission as the “defenders of al-Aqsa.” It is hard to imagine a situation in which Muslim Arabs will agree to allow Jewish prayer in the area, or even mass Jewish entry to the Temple Mount. The site is already rife with petrol fumes and is constantly volatile, particularly on respective festivals and dates that are holy to the two religions.

Jerusalem is an illustration of the fabric of mixed Jewish and Arab-Palestinian life. The friction between the two groups is noticeable every day. While the Arab public flocks to medical, shopping, and commercial centers in the west of the city, the Jewish population rarely sets foot in the Arab neighborhoods of East Jerusalem,

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<sup>3</sup> Shragai, N. (2022, June 16). The demographic crossword. *Yisrael Hayom*.  
<https://www.israelhayom.co.il/magazine/hashavua/article/11688132>

<sup>4</sup> Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. (2022). Two thirds of the residents of Jerusalem live in the “east of the city”: 234,000 Jews and 362,000 Arabs. <https://jcpa.org.il/article>

<sup>5</sup> Government Secretariat (2018, May 13). Reducing social and economic gaps and economic development in East Jerusalem. Government Resolution.

<sup>6</sup> Office of the State Comptroller. (2019). Social services for the Arab population in East Jerusalem.  
<https://www.mevaker.gov.il>

apart from the Old City. Moreover, freedom of movement between the east and west of the city provides access for criminals and terrorists.

### **Where Are We Headed?**

Those who claim that maintaining the current situation – managing the conflict, even if that means sliding into a one-state reality – is preferable to moves such as political, geographic, and demographic separation from the Palestinians ignore the fact that it is neither possible to overcome mutual enmity and bridge deep-seated ethnic, nationalist, and religious tensions, nor is it possible to make the Palestinians abandon their decades-long aspiration for self-determination. Three so-called “gray rhinos” are galloping toward us, and we seem oblivious to the approaching danger: the emergence of an intertwined fabric of mixed Jewish and Palestinian life that will be impossible to untangle and separate; a political impasse that cannot be breached in order to implement options for a future political arrangement; and the emergence of a one-state reality, which will undermine the Zionist vision of a democratic, secure, and thriving Jewish state – with dangerous implications for Israel’s international status, its social and economic conditions, and its internal and external security.

The public in Israel is worried about the security issue and does not see an attractive alternative to the current situation. It does not sense the immediate and concrete threat in the slide toward a one-state reality, and is therefore not pressuring the leadership to change its policy. The political system in Israel, for its part, is fully engaged in pressing matters of the day and does not look to the future, thus ignoring the fact that it needs to find ways to prevent the emergence of a reality that most of the Israeli public does not want. The findings of an opinion poll by the Institute of National Security Studies (INSS) in November 2021 show that almost 60 percent of the public (55 percent of those identified with the right wing of the political map) think that Israel should *now* be taking steps to separate from the Palestinians, in order to prevent one binational state from becoming a reality. Reversing the trend by separating from the Palestinians is the main challenge facing the next Israeli government – whatever its composition.