What Is the Problem With the Palestinian Problem?

Azar Gat | No. 1938 | February 16, 2025

The war that broke out on October 7, 2023, has brought the Palestinian issue back to the forefront of the global, Middle Eastern, and Israeli agenda. The debate over how to address—let alone resolve—it continues as it has for the past half-century, and in various forms—for more than a century. Why have all attempts at an agreement failed since the Oslo Accords, and what does this suggest about the prospects for resolving the conflict? In light of its frustrating persistence, the conflict continues to generate a range of opposing assessments and proposals from both sides of Israel's political spectrum regarding the required course of action. I believe that both sides of the debate often fall victim to illusions and self-deception. In the international arena, dismay and frustration are growing over the intractability of a conflict that preoccupies much of the world's attention for so long, even though the solution seems to be tantalizingly reachable.

The purpose of this article is not to assign moral blame to either party in the conflict—Israel or the Palestinians—but rather to analyze the reasons why every attempt to reach a final settlement has failed and what the implications of this are for the future, at least the foreseeable one. The main argument here is that the <u>primary</u> obstacle to implementing the two-state solution—on the face of it, the most logical, reasonable, and just solution to the conflict—lies in the aspirations of the Palestinian side and its fundamental perception of historical justice, which the two-state solution does not satisfy. A particularly dangerous— some might call it "tragic"—aspect of the conflict is that this impasse not only severely harms the Palestinians but also advances processes in Israel that pose a critical threat to its future.

Positions in Negotiations at Three Key Decision Points

In negotiations where both sides—Israel and the Palestinians—aim to maximize their gains, it is natural for each side to present opening or intermediate positions that could change over time. This is an expected dynamic and should not be given undue weight from either side.

However, since the signing of the Oslo Accords, there have been three critical moments when negotiations for a permanent settlement reached a decision point: (1) the parameters proposed by US President Bill Clinton in 2000; (2) the talks between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas from 2006 to 2008, held alongside the Annapolis Conference; and (3) US Secretary of State John Kerry's initiative from 2013 to 2014 during the Obama administration.

In each case, the proposed frameworks were very similar: an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza Strip, except for a small percentage, for which the Palestinians would be compensated with nearly equal or even equivalent land swaps within Israel's pre-1967

borders; a Palestinian extraterritorial passage between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; the division of Jerusalem along ethno-national lines, granting a special status to the Temple Mount with de facto Palestinian control; Palestinian waiver of the "right of return" into Israel for the 1948 refugees, except for a symbolic number; and international assistance for their resettlement in the Palestinian state or absorption by the Arab countries where they have been residing since 1948.

The Palestinians rejected the Clinton parameters by making counter-demands that contradicted the initiative's core principles. In the two later cases, the Palestinians ultimately withdrew from the negotiations without providing a final response, effectively "disappearing" from the process. Supporters of a historic compromise in Israel have offered various explanations for this pattern of Palestinian conduct, which will be discussed later. However, there are deeper underlying reasons for the Palestinian position.

Fundamental Perceptions and Aspirations Among the Palestinians

At the heart of the Palestinian national ethos is the dream of return—of the 1948 refugees and their descendants, across generations—to their lost villages and cities in Israel. This aspiration holds far greater significance than the vision of an independent state alongside Israel. In many ways, the Palestinian struggle has been directed much more against the consequences of 1948 rather than the results of 1967. Even during the Oslo period, when the Palestinian public and leadership expressed greater openness to a two-state solution, Israel's legitimacy was never recognized. The hope that any agreement reached would not be the end of the conflict was never abandoned, nor was the demand to give up the "right of return" to Israel ever accepted. The idea of settling the issue of return through partial, symbolic measures or alternative arrangements was always fundamentally rejected.

These positions do not exist in a vacuum. They are anchored in an expectation that a two-state solution does not mean the end of the conflict but rather serves as a springboard for continued struggle. All this in the hope that, over time, Israel might disappear and be replaced by a Palestinian state encompassing the entire territory from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, not fundamentally different from the PLO's "phased strategy" from 1974.

The stark asymmetry in the balance of power between the strong Israel compared to the weak Palestinians reinforces the global image of Israel as "Goliath" and the Palestinians as "David." However, the reality of the conflict is one of dual asymmetry: while Israel has marked superiority in many areas, certainly in comparison to the Palestinians, it remains deeply inferior in terms of population, land, and potentially resources and political strength vis-à-vis the broader Arab-Muslim world. Within this framework, acceptance of Israel is perceived not only as a failure to rectify the historical injustice but also as a national defeat and humiliation.

Throughout the conflict, this second asymmetry has fueled Arab hopes that Israel would eventually be defeated and disappear from the map—much like the Crusaders, who were expelled after a struggle lasting around 200 years. Even as parts of the Arab world have grown weary of the conflict's costs and have signed peace agreements with Israel, Israel's lack of legitimacy and the hope for its eventual disappearance remain deeply ingrained in the Arab public. Among the Palestinians—the group most directly involved in the conflict—this

sentiment is even stronger. Throughout the conflict, this position has persisted, pinning hopes in the emergence of a modern-day Saladin (such as Gamal Abdel Nasser, Saddam Hussein, or Iran), the demographic balance between Arabs and Jews in Israel-Palestine, and the Palestinians' adherence to their fundamental positions, particularly their commitment to prolonged struggle, with violent resistance at its core.

Unlike his predecessor Yasser Arafat, who personified the Palestinian struggle, Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) has consistently rejected armed struggle against Israel as being detrimental to the Palestinian cause. His stance, along with the Palestinian Authority's security cooperation with Israel—although not perfect—against Hamas and other militant groups in the West Bank, is of crucial practical importance. However, Abbas's Holocaust denial, his repeated claims that there is no Jewish people and that Israel lacks both historical roots in the land and moral legitimacy, as well as his refusal to accept the formula of "two states for two peoples," reflect the fundamental Palestinian perspective.

Some in Israel argue that Israel, confident in its own identity, does not need legitimacy from the Palestinians. However, the Palestinians' worldview directly influences their political stance—especially the insistence on the "right of return" and the political and emotional inability to relinquish it. The Palestinian refusal to reach a final compromise on the issue—beyond refugee quotas that will be determined for several years to come, but without giving up on the right—stems from the complete lack of legitimacy that such concessions have within Palestinian public opinion.

Indeed, a few within the Palestinian leadership and public, with varying levels of awareness, recognize that implementing the "right of return" is unlikely and that symbolic compromises or alternative solutions for the refugees should be accepted. Such views were voiced by some of Arafat's subordinates during the Camp David talks in 2000—which, in respect to them, Abbas himself opposed the notion of forgoing the "right of return." However, given the vision of return's deep roots in Palestinian national consciousness, even those who doubt its feasibility do not dare to openly renounce it. This unwillingness is driven not only by emotional and ideological convictions but also by a well-founded fear that doing so would endanger their lives. As Arafat told Clinton at Camp David: "If I betray, without a doubt, someone will come to kill me."[1]

The Arguments of the Israeli Left Regarding the Failure of Negotiations for a Final Settlement

In light of the resounding collapse of the Oslo Accords and the failure of the three rounds of permanent status talks, the Israeli left has offered various explanations for the Palestinians' unwillingness to accept the proposals presented to them. Regarding Clinton's parameters, it has been claimed that the American president introduced them in the final days of his term, leaving the Palestinians uncertain about their implementation. A similar claim has been made about the negotiations between Olmert and Abbas, as Olmert had already lost his political support as prime minister and was close to resignation. Similarly, there has been no shortage

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[1] Chris Hawke, "Wallace Quizzes Arafat on Violence," CBS News, November 3, 2000, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/wallace-quizzes-arafat-on-violence/

of explanations for Abbas's second "disappearance" when he was asked to make a decision on Kerry's proposals.

However, as argued here, the Israeli apologetic explanations for the failure of talks at the three decisive moments regarding a final status agreement—particularly in the first two cases, where the Israeli leadership was clearly eager to reach an agreement—overlook the deeper reasons for the Palestinians' unwillingness: the absolute lack of legitimacy to formally and conclusively renounce the implementation of the "right of return" and the immense difficulty of granting legitimacy to Israel's existence and recognizing the finality of the conflict. Otherwise, as many have pointed out, the Palestinians should have seized and secured the offers that were on the table, thereby putting any future Israeli government that sought to reject the agreement in an impossible position on the international stage.

As awareness in Israel of these profound difficulties in the negotiations grew, supporters of an agreement adopted the phrase that "the Palestinians, of course, have not joined the Zionist Movement." This rings like a form of self-deception in the guise of sophisticated understatement.

At the same time, and even more so following the disaster of October 7, some on the left have argued that the Israeli public is suffering from ongoing trauma. According to this view, the trauma, ostensibly rooted in the Holocaust, has been compounded by past failures to reach an agreement with the Palestinians, the horrors of terrorism and the Second Intifada, and the consequences of the unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Those who hold this view suggest that this trauma should be treated with understanding and approached with a kind of therapeutic mindset, aiming to calm exaggerated irrational fears and prepare the way for a two-state solution. Another common argument is that the Israeli public lacks sufficient understanding of the Palestinians and their aspirations.

In contrast, it is claimed here that the Israeli public very well understands the depth of Palestinian hostility and the severity of the risks associated with Palestinian statehood, even if it does not necessarily know how to articulate its feelings in sophisticated conceptual-analytical terms. Two major risks inherent in a two-state solution are worth highlighting. First, even if an agreement prohibits the rise to power of Hamas, or any other group that rejects a peace agreement, there is no practical guarantee against such a scenario. Whether through force or elections, the ascension of a hostile entity in a future Palestinian state could pose a grave danger to Israel, located at the very heart of the country.

This brings us to another key issue—demilitarization—often discussed in the context of peace agreements, although it has lost much of its former significance. Historically, demilitarization was considered one of the most critical security guarantees in case an agreement failed. Such a clause was particularly meaningful in an era when military threats were defined by heavy weaponry—primarily aircraft, tanks, armored vehicles, and heavy artillery. However, this reality has changed, especially in the Palestinian context.

Current warfare is dominated by lightweight weaponry that is easily smuggled, locally produced in some cases, and difficult to detect. These include rockets, light drones, and anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles. In a sovereign Palestinian state, where the Israeli armed forces

would no longer operate systematically and persistently, preventing the widespread proliferation of such weapons—whether with or without government approval—would be extremely difficult. Moreover, these weapons are ideally suited for arming non-state actors, militias, and organizations that do not recognize or submit to a central authority and its (theoretical) monopoly on power.

The Arab Peace Initiative

Some voices in Israel advocate resolving the conflict by accepting the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which has been reaffirmed several times by the Arab League. According to this proposal, Israel would withdraw from all the territories it captured in 1967 and accept "a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem to be agreed upon in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 194" from December 1948. In return, the Arab world would recognize Israel and make peace with it.

However, proponents of this initiative in Israel—when they do not forget to mention the refugee clause—seem to overlook a crucial point: accepting the initiative would mean legally recognizing UN General Assembly Resolution 194, which, like all General Assembly resolutions, is not legally binding. Such recognition would effectively grant it legal standing in international law—something Israel has consistently avoided doing. Allegedly, there should be no problem, as the Arab Peace Initiative offers a solution that will "be agreed upon" in accordance with Resolution 194—which is similar to suggesting a solution to the question of Judea and Samaria that will "be agreed upon" in accordance with the political platform of the Israeli far-right.

For those supporters in Israel of the Arab Peace Initiative, it seems clear that the Palestinian demands for a "just solution" to the refugee issue would be reasonable and would not entail large-scale implementation of the "right of return." However, the actual wording of UN Resolution 194 states: "Refugees wishing to return to their homes and live in peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date."

Furthermore, it seems that the few supporters in Israel of the Arab League's peace proposal do not take into consideration the telltale geopolitical events in the Middle East since 2002: the Arab Spring, the murderous civil wars in Libya, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Sudan (and previously in Algeria and Lebanon), and Iran's actions and influence through its proxies. Experience has shown that the Arab League has little capability to prevent or resolve conflicts within the Arab world itself, making it difficult to assume it would be effective in resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Saudi Arabia—which originally proposed the initiative—initially suggested a version that did not require Israel to accept UN Resolution 194. However, under Palestinian and Syrian pressure, the final Arab Peace Initiative incorporated this demand. It is no coincidence that today, Saudi Arabia is pursuing far less ambitious proposals regarding the Palestinian issue as a condition for normalization with Israel.

The Danger of No Peace Agreement in the Foreseeable Future, and the Positions of the Israeli Right

The assessment that a peace agreement with the Palestinians is unlikely in the foreseeable future raises questions about the implications of this deadlock and what will happen in the absence of an agreement.

The repeated failure of the peace efforts—combined with what many in Israel perceive as a lack of genuine accountability on the part of the Israeli left regarding the reasons for the failure and the depth of Palestinians' lack of recognition—has led to a general shift to the right among Israelis. However, it is important to recognize that the mistakes and failures of one side on the political spectrum do not automatically validate the positions of the other side, which may be doomed to failure no less, or perhaps more.

The most pressing danger in a reality where there is no peace agreement on the horizon is the continued expansion of Jewish settlement deep within the West Bank, in densely populated Palestinian areas. This expansion is progressing by default, driven by settler activity—sometimes with government approval, sometimes without it. The long-term consequence of this trajectory is a reality in which political separation between the Palestinian and Jewish populations will no longer be feasible. This, in turn, poses the greatest threat to the future of the State of Israel, as it could lead to a binational Jewish-Arab state, one that would likely evolve into an Arab-Muslim state over the entire territory.

In contrast, the Israeli right, in its various ideological shades, lays out the following conceptual framework. The vision of the far right, largely driven by a concept of messianic redemption, advocates applying full Israeli sovereignty over all the territories, dismantling the Palestinian Authority, extensively expanding Jewish settlements, and employing harsh military measures and targeted expulsions to suppress Palestinian resistance. The far right supports actively encouraging large-scale Palestinian emigration from the territories, while those who remain would be granted permanent residency status but without Israeli citizenship. This camp regards President Trump's recent proposal to resettle the inhabitants of the Gaza Strip elsewhere as a first step in the realization of its vision.

The mainstream right also supports settlement expansion, albeit with greater limitations. Many within this camp also believe that a significant demographic change can be achieved by encouraging Palestinian emigration to other countries. The mainstream right generally favors annexing large portions of the West Bank—particularly those with smaller Palestinian populations that are currently under direct Israeli control (Area C). However, in contrast to the far right, the mainstream right views Palestinian autonomy as a lesser evil and a necessary long-term solution for the areas that will not be annexed to Israel. The autonomy will allow for Palestinian self-governance over population centers while maintaining overall Israeli control.

The Proposals of the Israeli Right Critiqued

In my opinion, there is no chance of fundamentally altering the demographic reality in the land which is Israel/Palestine: Two distinct ethno-national populations—Jewish and Arab—exist there, and they are there to stay. President Trump's proposals with respect to the Gaza Strip are unlikely to be accepted—no more than his plans for Canada—and will not change this fundamental reality. The debate over whether there is an approaching numerical parity

between Jews and Arabs or even an Arab majority between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean, or whether a Jewish majority will persist, is of little real significance. Currently, the State of Israel, with an Arab minority comprising approximately 20% of its population, functions as a Jewish and democratic state, where civil equality and proper integration for the Arab minority can be maintained. However, an Israel in which Arabs make up about 40% of the population would effectively become a binational state, in which every issue would be viewed through the lens of ethnic conflict. This is true even in relation to Belgium, which is effectively divided between Flemings and Walloons, despite the absence of violent conflict there.

The question of whether the Arabs in the territories constitute a distinct Palestinian people entitled to self-determination in an independent state, or whether they are simply part of the broader Arab identity of the Middle East, is similarly pointless. The real issue is their citizenship. In today's world, there is no precedent for a population being held indefinitely in conditions of statelessness. When China conquered Tibet, or when Russia annexed parts of Ukraine, both nations immediately applied their sovereignty over those territories, granting residents citizenship—whether they wanted it or not. However, for huge countries like China and Russia, such moves do not pose a demographic problem.

The mainstream Israeli right today seems to favor an approach in which the vast majority of Arabs in the territories would not be annexed to Israel but instead would remain citizens of a Palestinian autonomy. However, autonomy means a degree of self-government granted to citizens of a sovereign state in an area within the state's recognized borders. Autonomy means that the residents of the autonomous region have both their own limited self-government, which they elect, and the right to participate in the election of the central government to which their autonomy is subordinate. Autonomous regions, such as the Basque Country in Spain, whose residents are Spanish citizens, vote in elections to the Spanish parliament and are entitled to be elected to it, including for leadership positions. This is also true of Scotland's status in the United Kingdom, and of Greenland's status within Denmark.

This is not merely a semantic issue. International norms do not recognize a separation between state sovereignty and citizenship. If a Palestinian autonomy is to exist, in which country will its residents hold citizenship? Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, who originally introduced the concept of autonomy and understood its implications, proposed a solution in the spirit of Jabotinsky: that residents of a Palestinian autonomous area should be able to choose between Jordanian and Israeli citizenship. He also agreed that Arabs in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza who choose Israeli citizenship would have the same rights as any other citizen to vote for the Knesset and settle anywhere in Israel.[2] He had hoped, perhaps naively,

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[2] 15. A resident of the areas of Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip, who will apply for Israeli citizenship—will receive it, in accordance with the Citizenship Law of the State of Israel;
16. Residents of Judea, Samaria and Gaza who will choose, according to the right to free choice, Israeli citizenship, shall be entitled to vote and be elected to the Knesset, under the Elections Law;
20. Residents of Israel will be entitled to purchase land and to settle in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip. Arab residents of Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip, who according to the free choice given to them will become citizens of Israel, will be entitled to purchase land and settle in Israel. See "The Original

that the majority of West Bank Palestinians would choose Jordanian citizenship, thereby preserving Israel's Jewish and democratic character.

During his first term, President Trump—who was highly supportive of Israel and largely indifferent to any norms—innocently declared, to the shock of Israelis, that he had no preference between a one-state or two-state solution—"whatever you choose." He too did not conceive of state sovereignty without citizenship.

Some on the right still believe that the debate over Palestinian autonomy versus statehood is mainly a semantic issue and are willing to frame their preferred solution as a "limited Palestinian state" rather than "autonomy." However, to those in Israel accepting a Palestinian <u>state</u> with significant restrictions, two critical issues must be clarified:

1. A Palestinian state cannot exist in a "Swiss cheese" format, as scattered enclaves within Israeli sovereign territory and limited to 30% of the territory, as some on the right envision. This model is precisely the apartheid concept of South Africa, in which the Bantustans were "independent." The entire world, including Israel's friends, would perceive such an arrangement in the same way.

2. It would be impossible—both in principle and in practice—to prevent Palestinian refugees from returning to that state. The very idea of restricting the sovereignty of a Palestinian state in this way would be unacceptable not only to the Palestinians but also to the international community.

Given these realities, what is necessary and reasonable within the framework of the restrictions is indeed demilitarization—although this concept is more challenging today—and Israel's right to military intervention for self-defense if the Palestinian state fails to prevent terrorist activity or military threats. This principle aligns with the security understandings Israel reached with the United States regarding southern Lebanon in the November 2024 ceasefire agreement following its conflict with Hezbollah.

The idea of an Israeli–Palestinian—or even Israeli–Palestinian–Jordanian—confederation is paradoxically supported by both the Israeli right and far left, though for vastly different reasons. On the right, a confederation is perceived as a means of preventing the partition of the land and preserving the Israeli settlements as a legitimate right, combined with national separation—essentially "having it both ways." Conversely, on the left, a confederation is seen as a way to ensure equal national and civil rights for both sides in a reality where physical political separation between the two populations is increasingly difficult, and also as a solution that will not leave disadvantaged national minorities within either state.

A confederation is a vague concept, but it is generally understood to involve the concept of freedom of movement and residence throughout the entire territory, with individuals retaining the right to choose their citizenship. However, its supporters on the Israeli right often

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Autonomy Plan of Prime Minister Menachem Begin," December 28, 1977, https://content.ecf.org.il/files/M00140_Israel%27sSelf-RulePlan-HebrewText_0.pdf

overlook what supporters on the left see as an advantage in their end-of-days vision of a shared life of peace and fraternity: movement and population mixing not only in one direction—Israelis into Judea and Samaria (and Gaza)—but in both directions, throughout the confederation. Even those who think that it is possible to maintain separate citizenships within the confederation's boundaries should take into account the massive settlement of Arabs from the Palestinian territories and from all over the Middle East into Israel, which offers enormous economic advantages.

As in the rest of the world—and contrary to the hopes of the Israeli right—the uncontrollable pressure of emigration will be directed toward the developed world, into Israel, and not from it. Ultimately, even if, according to the agreement, these Arab settlers in practice will not have the right to Israeli citizenship, they will demand it as permanent residents of Israel and as an integral part of its population. Their descendants, born in Israel, will certainly demand it as well, and it will be impossible to deny it to them over time. Given the broader regional demographics—with Israel the size of New Jersey—this process would ultimately lead to the end of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people—and possibly its end altogether. Thus, a political separation between the two peoples remains Israel's paramount strategic interest.

Other Solutions?

This brings us to several alternative proposals that, while having stronger internal logic, still face immense practical difficulties.

One leading option is a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from approximately 70% of the West Bank and all of Gaza while retaining control of the major settlement blocs adjacent to the 1967 lines and the Jordan Valley, and maintaining Israel's right to intervene militarily to prevent Hamas takeovers or the emergence of military or terrorist threats in the evacuated territory. Even if such disengagement does not immediately resolve the question of Palestinian sovereignty, it could be viewed internationally—and by Israel's friends—as a step in the right direction. More importantly, it would mitigate what many see as Israel's greatest existential threat: the irreversible intermixing of the two populations and the move toward a one-state reality.

However, the obstacles to such a step—widely supported by the Israeli center-left—are immense. Public trust in unilateral separation suffered a severe blow following the consequences of the 2005 disengagement from Gaza, which led to the rise of Hamas, repeated rounds of fighting, rocket attacks on Israel, and the events of October 7, 2023. Israel's new security approach, whereby Israel will now act preemptively along its borders to thwart threats, has not alleviated these justified concerns.

Moreover, the situation on the ground has dramatically changed since the previous rounds of negotiations. Jewish settlements have expanded in the heart of densely populated Palestinian areas deep in the West Bank, making their evacuation almost impossible. Not only does the scope of the settlements prevent this, but the settlers' resolute opposition to evacuation has been strengthened by the political climate in Israel following the protests against the 2023 judicial overhaul and what the right perceives as a refusal to recognize the authority of an

elected government. Moreover, among a significant sector of the settlers, radicalization has intensified, expressed in a rejection of state authority and adherence to an ideology of violence against Palestinians.

Thus, even the idea of leaving the settlers in place after disengagement, rather than forcibly evacuating them, is also fraught with seemingly insurmountable challenges. Their continued presence in the area would undermine the very purpose of the disengagement between the populations and would inevitably result in violent clashes between armed settler militias and Palestinian forces and civilians.

Similar obstacles stand in the way of the idea of reaching a political agreement with the Palestinians that does not attempt to resolve all disputed issues immediately but rather postpones the most contentious ones. According to this approach, a Palestinian state would be established alongside Israel based on the parameters proposed in the three previous rounds of talks, while the final negotiations on the refugee issue and the "right of return" would be deferred to a later stage. This concept was the basis of a private initiative recently announced by Ehud Olmert and former Palestinian Foreign Minister Nasser al-Kidwa. Notably, even in this unofficial framework—developed by two former officials eager to create a peace plan—the Palestinian side was neither willing nor able to formally renounce the "right of return."

It can be argued—reasonably so—that from the perspective of the international community and Israel's friends, such an agreement would be perceived as final in practice. It would serve Israel's primary interest of securing international legitimacy and enabling the separation between Israelis and Palestinians. However, given the Palestinians' refusal to renounce the "right of return"—alongside the aforementioned numerous other obstacles on both sides to the arrangement—the likelihood of such an initiative gaining the confidence of the Israeli majority appears slim.

An idea that was once favored by the Labor Party governments in Israel is the notion of a Jordanian–Palestinian federation encompassing the vast majority of the territories. This idea offers several potential advantages: the Hashemite Kingdom has historically been, and remains, a natural ally of Israel against Palestinian radicalism. The broader Jordanian–Palestinian framework would encompass a significant portion of the Palestinian diaspora, thereby expanding the political solution for the Palestinians beyond what they perceive as a truncated state in the West Bank and Gaza. In this framework, the Palestinian state would be connected to the Jordanian state through two federal legislative bodies, and the right of return would be granted to this federation. Proponents of this option believe that the federal state would continue to have only a Jordanian army, with a distinctly "Jordanian" character, and that all weapons would remain under Jordanian control. The border at Kfar Saba would be with Jordan, not Palestine.

However, it is unclear whether the Hashemite Kingdom would still be willing to consider such an arrangement, given that it would lead to an overwhelming Palestinian majority within the federation. From the Palestinian perspective, such an arrangement might be seen as a springboard toward a Palestinian state on both sides of the Jordan River. In the past, some

Israelis have favored redirecting Palestinian national aspirations eastward as a desirable solution; however, some fear that this approach could ultimately strengthen a Palestinian adversary on both banks of the Jordan River, reviving the old Palestinian slogan that "the road to Jerusalem passes through Amman."

In response to the settlement reality that has developed in the West Bank, the Trump administration in 2020 introduced the so-called "Deal of the Century." Its key innovation was the idea of preserving all Jewish settlements, including those deep in the West Bank, placing them under Israeli sovereignty and connecting them to Israel through an extensive network of tunnels and bridges. According to this plan, Palestinian and Israeli-controlled areas would exist adjacent to each other and interspersed, with different access levels to ensure separation between the two states.

Despite its American architects' strongly pro-Israel stance, the plan was met with a lukewarm reception even within the Israeli right-wing. Aside from Prime Minister Netanyahu, not a single right-wing Knesset member explicitly endorsed it, with many outright rejecting its terms because of its endorsement of a Palestinian state. Meanwhile, the likelihood of the Palestinians accepting this proposal—or President Trump's current proposal for the Gaza Strip—is nil. Another question is how well the plan will serve Israel's interests over time. It cannot be ignored that the evacuation of settlements deep in the West Bank has become virtually impossible. However, leaving them under Israeli sovereignty in a reality of no agreement continues the mixing of populations on the ground by default and the danger of the one-state solution. Instead of the settlements in densely populated Palestinian areas deep in the West Bank strengthening Israeli interests, Israeli interests have become subservient to the settlers' project.

Conclusion

Reviewing the range of possibilities for a potential Israeli–Palestinian settlement—and the significant obstacles in its path—is both frustrating and, at times, even discouraging. The conflict is more deeply rooted than is often acknowledged. The seemingly small differences that remain between the positions of the two sides—Israeli and Palestinian—lead many to believe that only one or two small additional steps, combined with an "act of leadership" on both sides, are all that are needed to break through to a peace agreement. The comparison to Egypt and the peace deal achieved with it is also misleading. Egypt and Israel were not fighting over the same land, and for Egypt, the Israeli conflict was always secondary to its core national interests. While disengaging from the conflict was difficult and a blow to Egyptian national sentiment, it was still possible—even if it required Anwar Sadat to take an extraordinary political risk by defying the Egyptian and broader Arab world. The emergence of a Palestinian Sadat is not inconceivable, but such a leader would face far greater obstacles, and the likelihood of assassination for abandoning fundamental Palestinian positions is significantly higher.

That said, the local, regional, and global reality is dynamic and unpredictable. More than a year into a traumatic and turbulent war, its long-term impact on the Middle East in general

and on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in particular remains unknown and far from fully understood.

Resolving the Palestinian issue remains an Israeli interest of the highest order, second only to Israel's fundamental security and existence as a Jewish and democratic state. It is an illusion to think that Israel can survive without maintaining a decisive Jewish majority while simultaneously ensuring civil equality for its minority populations. Any action or inaction that makes political separation between Israelis and Palestinians more difficult endangers Israel's very existence. Historically, Israel has benefited greatly from Palestinian rejectionism—from their rejection of the 1937 Peel Commission partition plan to the 1947 UN partition plan and beyond. As former Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban famously remarked, "The Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity." However, Israel's benefiting from Palestinian rejectionism has likely run its course, and Israel should not overextend itself beyond what it can sustain.

Israel must halt further settlement expansion in densely populated Palestinian areas that will prevent the political separation of the two peoples. Additionally, Israel should adopt a position that Prime Minister Netanyahu expressed in his Bar-Ilan speech in 2009—before he became politically beholden to the far right—when he asked whether a future Palestinian state would be "Iran or Costa Rica." This position should include acceptance of the two-state solution, conditioned on practical changes by the Palestinian Authority regarding its discourse on Israel's legitimacy, its financial support for the families of terrorists, and its effective abandonment of the "right of return." These conditions should not serve as a right-wing excuse to prevent negotiations but rather because, as we have seen, they have real practical implications for the Palestinian Authority's operative policy positions. Furthermore, any Israeli proposal must be contingent on securing international agreements, particularly with the United States, affirming Israel's right to intervene militarily in Palestinian territory against any military or terrorist threat under the principle of self-defense, as was recently agreed upon regarding southern Lebanon.

It is difficult to envision the Palestinians accepting and implementing these conditions in the foreseeable future. However, such a stance would distance Israel from the threat of a one-state reality, shift the burden of proof to the Palestinian side, and provide Israel with legitimacy in the international arena—at least among its friends.

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