Death of the ‘Two-State Solution’

Exclusive: For years, proposals for a “one-state solution” to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – granting equal rights to all inhabitants – were called anti-Semitic. But Israel’s settlement building has now left no other rational choice, notes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

Donald Trump’s election victory raises many unanswered questions, but it also settles a few, starting with the fate of the Israeli-Palestinian “peace process.” In the words of Israeli Education Minister and Jewish Home Party leader Naftali Bennett, “The era of a Palestinian state is over.”

Lest anyone accuse the Israeli hardliner of wishful thinking, one need only recall candidate Trump’s insistence last spring that Israelis “really have to keep going” with settling the territories that they have occupied since 1967. Two months later, the Republican Party changed its 2012 platform to omit support for a Palestinian state and to condemn the “false notion that Israel is an occupier.”

Last week, a co-chair of the Trump campaign’s Israel Advisory Committee reaffirmed that the President-elect rejects Washington’s traditional view that Israel’s settlements are obstacles to peace and illegal under international law.

The so-called “two-state solution” — creation of a Palestinian national homeland comprising the West Bank and Gaza, and coexisting with Israel — has been a longstanding axiom of official U.S. policy, accepted as well by Israel and its unofficial lobbying arm, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

Of late, however, the rise of extreme Jewish nationalists to power in Israel, the relentless expansion of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, and Israel’s evident disinterest in peace negotiations have all but killed hopes for such a solution. In 2015, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared, “There will be no withdrawals” from the occupied West Bank and “no concessions” to the Palestinians.

As Americans for Peace Now points out, “more than 40% of the West Bank is under the direct control of settlers or settlements and off-limits to Palestinians. . . . Israel has taken hundreds of kilometers of the West Bank to build roads that serve the settlements, . . . dividing Palestinian cities and towns from each other, and imposing various barriers to Palestinian movement and access. . . . Such settlements, and new settlement construction going on today, have the explicit goal of preventing the establishment of a Palestinian capital in East
Jerusalem – which, in effect, means preventing the two-state solution.”

Many of Israel’s staunchest allies in the United States now concede this reality. Hillary Clinton, in a private email to one of her advisers, acknowledged in 2015 that the Israeli-Palestinian peace process had become a phony “Potemkin” spectacle. Secretary of State John Kerry warned publicly that Israeli settlement-building was “imperiling the viability of a two-state solution.”

Roger Cohen, the New York Times columnist and an ardent liberal Zionist, reported last month following a trip to Israel that the two-state idea is all but “clinically dead.” He explained: “The incorporation of all the biblical Land of Israel has advanced too far, for too long, to be reversed now.”

Many Israeli supporters of a two-state solution now publicly admit that bitter truth. Former Prime Minister Ehud Barak accuses Netanyahu of engaging in a “messianic drive” toward “a single Jewish state, from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea.” For the current crop of right-wing leaders in Israel, the main question is whether to offer Palestinians citizenship within an expanded Israel or to remove them.

Palestinians also concede privately that their dream of a state is dead. Said noted Palestinian pollster Khalil Shikaki, “We, Israelis and Palestinians, live in a one-state reality.” Former Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei, declared bluntly, “there will be no alternative but one state. No alternative.”

What Path Forward?

If a Palestinian state is truly dead, Palestinians will need to give up their decades-old nationalist aspirations, a wrenching blow that many will find hard to accept. Israelis, in turn, will need to find room in a bi-national democratic state for millions of Palestinians – roughly equal in number to Jews – an even more wrenching adjustment that many will fight to the bitter end. Liberal Zionists have warned for years that refusal to accept a Palestinian state would force Israel to choose between remaining a democratic state or a Jewish state.

As former Prime Minister Barak put it, the “overarching ambition” of absorbing the occupied territories “is bound to culminate in either a single, binational state, which, within a generation, may have a Jewish minority and likely a Bosnia-like civil war, or else an apartheid reality if Palestinian residents are deprived of the right to vote. Both spell doom for the Zionist dream.”

An apartheid-like reality already exists for Palestinians, but many Israelis and their supporters publicly rationalize it as an unfortunate but temporary necessity during a transitional period that will end with a peace settlement. By
putting off determination of the final status of the occupied territories, Israel can justify subjecting Palestinians to harsh military law, seizing their land, demolishing their homes, controlling their movements, and jailing them at will rather than granting them the rights afforded to Israeli citizens.

Israeli political scientist and former deputy mayor of Jerusalem Meron Benvenisti has been saying for years that “the whole notion of a Palestinian state . . . is a sham.” Israel has maintained the pretense of peace talks only “because it is self-serving,” he said. While talking about two states as a goal, Israeli governments continue funding the expansion of settlements. Palestinian officials, meanwhile, help enforce order in return for millions of dollars in international aid.

But if Israeli hardliners succeed in ending the fiction of a peace process and annex the territories, “then the Palestinian struggle will inevitably be transformed from one demanding independence into a movement demanding equal rights,” says James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute. “If this is to be the case, we may well see the day when the Palestinian citizens of Israel will emerge . . . as the new leadership of a unified Palestinian community fighting for justice and equality.”

Such a fight will face tremendous opposition. In recent years, polls of Israeli adults show that nearly half believe Arabs should be expelled from Israel. Nearly eight in 10 believe Jews should receive preferential treatment compared to non-Jews. The Netanyahu government and Knesset are filled with overt racists. Last year, Netanyahu appointed as deputy defense minister a rabbi who asserted, “[Palestinians] are like animals, they aren’t human.”

The Israeli peace activist and public opinion analyst Dahlia Scheindlin doesn’t minimize the hurdles, but said Palestinians may be ready to fight for their rights within Israel. “Israeli racism [is] better than Israeli occupation,” she wrote, “and they probably feel [they] can live with it as long as there are democratic foundations to demand better. Maybe for them, Israeli rule cannot possibly make their status quo worse, but at least it offers the possibility of something many of them simply lack: citizenship.”

Democratic Rights

Some hope is offered by the fact that several notable right-leaning Israeli politicians favor granting Palestinians full democratic rights within a greater Israel, rather than subordinating them forever under the thumb of military occupation or Jim Crow-type segregation.

As New Yorker editor David Remnick observed a couple of years ago, Israeli
President Reuven Rivlin — a member of the rightist Likud party — has “emerged as the most prominent critic of racist rhetoric, jingoism, fundamentalism, and sectarian violence, the highest-ranking advocate among Jewish Israelis for the civil rights of the Palestinians both in Israel and in the occupied territories.”

Rivlin visited an Arab town that had been the scene of an Israeli massacre in 1956 to apologize and “swear, in my name and that of all our descendants, that we will never act against the principle of equal rights, and we will never try and force someone from our land.” He also condemned racist fans of a Jerusalem soccer team who protested its signing of two Muslim players.

For such sentiments, not surprisingly, Rivlin has been called a “traitor,” “rotten filth,” and even “lying little Jew” by his Israeli haters.

But Rivlin is not alone. Moshe Arens, a former Likud leader, minister of defense and foreign affairs, and ambassador to the United States, supports giving Palestinians in the West Bank the right to vote in Israeli elections. The key to preserving Israeli democracy, he wrote in 2010, will be making them feel at home in the state of Israel, “enjoying not only equality of rights but also equality of opportunities.”

It will take a minor miracle to persuade the Israeli public to risk broadening their democracy to incorporate millions of Palestinians, but the longer the unsupportable status quo prevails, the less likely it becomes that any Israelis will enjoy the democratic and civil rights they have long known. Israel’s media is under assault from the government, leading Freedom House to downgrade its assessment of the country’s press from “free” to “partly free.” Israeli peace activists and NGOs face constant harassment and persecution. Rightist demonstrators routinely chant “Death to Arabs.”

Former Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon, a member of the Likud Party, recently declared, “The leadership of Israel in 2016 is busy with inflaming passions and causing fear between Jews and Arabs, between right and left and between different ethnic groups in order to survive in power.”

And Ilan Baruch, Israel’s former ambassador to South Africa, said, “Netanyahu is pushing Israeli democracy to the brink... This is the most right-wing government in the country’s history, which has no qualms about taking tactical and strategic steps in the media, education, and culture in order to ensure Netanyahu’s permanent rule. To do that, the government sows racist divisions... slanders and preaches hatred for the Other – be they Arab citizens of Israel, Palestinians, African refugees, or human rights activists.”
Still, with the pretense of a two-state solution shattered by Trump’s victory and Netanyahu’s open intransigence, supporters of Israeli democracy and Palestinian rights can finally begin an unblinkered discussion of how to achieve a genuine accommodation between those two peoples in a common land.

In the words of Sandy Tolan, author of the international bestseller *The Lemon Tree*, “Now, at least, there is an opportunity to lay the foundations for some newer kind of solution grounded in human rights, freedom of movement, complete cessation of settlement building, and equal access to land, water, and places of worship. It will have to be based on a new reality, which Israel and the United States have had such a hand in creating. Think of it as the one-state solution.”

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