Between One and Two: Debating Confederation and One-State Solution for Israel/Palestine

The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of MEI

By Oren Yiftachel

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As far as I know, this is one of the first times that the subject, which is so central to the future of the society in Israel/Palestine, has been discussed in the Israeli academic world in an open forum with many participants. The courage to discuss this issue deserves highlighting these days, and it represents the real and free academic spirit that has recently been under strong attack.

We can begin our journey by noting the symbolic date of our meeting, the 17th of May. On this date, two revolutionary political events took place in Israel. The first, in 1977, brought Menachem Begin to the reins of power; the second was the election of Ehud Barak as prime minister, in 1999. These two governments had a disastrous effect on the chances for Israeli-Palestinian peace. My cautious hope is that today’s conference is an omen of revolutionary change – in the opposite direction.
My talk is based on much research and writing, over many years, on the political geography of Israel/Palestine. Some of what I will say appears in my book Ethnocracy published a few years back, and in follow-up articles. In that book, I analyze in depth the regime prevailing between Jordan and Sea, and interpret the major dilemma in sketching the future political geography of this space, that is– Israel/Palestine: On the one hand, the Jewish colonialism in the West Bank prevents, and apparently will continue to frustrate, the establishment of a viable Palestinian state as a foundation for conciliation; on the other hand, the existence of Israel as a recognized state and the strength of Zionist nationalism prevent the coming of the one-state-solution (bi-national or secular) between Jordan and Sea. These factors have created a structural situation in which neither the standard solution of two-states nor the one-state solution provides a reasonable framework for the needed and urgent Zionist-Palestinian reconciliation.

Consequently, I will argue that we urgently need, now, to create a third space–conceptually and politically–that leads to creation of an Israel-Palestinian confederation. This arrangement is the most suitable for creating a geopolitical foundation for a viable peace, since it provides a framework that enables each of the two states to realize its right to self-determination, while considering the territory’s complex geography and history. The Palestinian state will realize the right to self-determination for the Palestinians and the Israeli state the right to self-determination for the Israelis, with the full rights of the minorities living in both states being ensured. The inhabitants of the confederation will maintain a joint economy and benefit from freedom of movement between the two entities. An autonomous, jointly-run capital region will be established in Jerusalem. A similar political plan, with somewhat different geographical borders, was laid out in UN Resolution 181. Despite the political opposition at the crucial time, both sides ultimately accepted the resolution. In the present political setting, this idea can offer a new path for ending the present colonial grip over Palestine, secure Israel’s existence, and protect human rights for all living between Jordan and Sea. Below I shall elaborate on my argument, focusing on conceptual points, as much as time permits.

At the request of the organizers, I shall concentrate primarily on criticism of the one-state solution, as worded in dozens of articles and books in recent years, and in the One-State Declaration that was published in 2007. I will not dwell on the deep problems entailed in
the standard two-state solution, which I have criticized on numerous occasions. I will state only in brief, that a solution that seeks to attain stability and legitimacy by forcing complete separation of Israelis and Palestinians is an illusion. Since the Oslo Accords, in the framework of purported discussions on establishment of a Palestinian state, Israel has done almost everything it could to destroy that possibility, principally by deepening the Jewish colonization and restricting development of a national Palestinian leadership. Under current settings, should a Palestinian state be established, it would be highly dependent on Israel; geographically split, and lacking real sovereignty. Hence, it’s likely to become a source of constant instability. This being the case, continued discussion of the two-state solution in its present format is a certain recipe for continuation of the conflict, rather than its solution.

In addition to the important substantive elements of the confederation framework I propose, it unsettles the problematic dichotomy dominating the political debate between proponents of the one- and two-state solutions. By sanctifying the final format, the dichotomy prevents serious and frank discussion of the various possibilities to move toward a political geography of conciliation between Jordan and Sea. The confederation model, on the other hand, is more open and flexible. In several places around the world, confederation has served as a stabilizing bridge in the time between conflict and conciliation.

Confederations at a Glance

You are no doubt asking now—“What is confederation?” There are several technical definitions which appear in encyclopedias and lexica, but they all share the notion that a confederation is a framework for close association and cooperation between sovereign states, held by a covenant or treaty. Confederation is created in a “bottom up” process, in contrast to a federation, which is “top down.” In a federation, powers are delegated from the central sovereign body (government, parliament) to the states or provincial sub-units. In a confederation, the states, which retain their sovereignty, allocate powers "upward" to create the 'higher' body to govern joint affairs. Hence, in a confederation, as opposed to federation, the states maintain veto power on the existence and nature of the joint political framework ...
Sounds promising? Maybe. But research on the confederation model is insufficient, and the historical record of this solution is uneven. Let us elaborate on a couple of the known success stories.

Switzerland and Canada were established as confederations after 19th Century ethnic wars resembling the Zionist-Palestinian conflict. In those cases, a strong ethno-national group gained control over weaker groups, but rather than continue to oppress them, offered a framework of self-determination, and a decentralized form of government, by way of compromise and cooperation. In recent decades, Belgium, too, has transformed (unofficially) to a model resembling a confederacy: the Walloons and the Flemish enjoy self-determination and self-rule in almost all spheres of life. Brussels—possibly in a status similar to Jerusalem, with local, national and global significance—is a shared autonomous capital region. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, vicious ethnic conflict stabilized following establishment of the Dayton confederation framework in which the Serbs, Bosnians, and Croats enjoy autonomy and separate territory while operating a joint economy and security apparatus, with a strong European umbrella. The last two examples are far from ideal, but their confederal system, which combines separate ethno-national existence with joint management of the space, enables them to create a non-violent democratic space after generations of bitter ethnic conflicts.

The key to these models is a combination of freedom of movement throughout the entire space, statutory and political self-determination for the different groups in various regions, and establishment of a "layer" of joint governance management and administration of the whole territory.

The European Union is the most famous and ambitious confederation "in the making". The EU is an incredible precedent: strong nation-states with a chauvinist past of nationalist wars and racist colonialism, which have given up some of their sovereignty for the sake of a supra-national entity. The unprecedented success of the EU—now the most peaceful region in the world—has provided a major geopolitical foundation for the long era of international cooperation and prosperity. In this context, it should be mentioned that the EU began as a very "thin" confederation, with only six countries in the 1950s. It began with the intent of instituting uniform trade laws on the import and export of coal and steel, and later created a common economic community. On these modest foundations an enormous political
organization was later built, one that institutes confederation arrangements between Estonia in the east to Portugal in the west.

The list of confederations throughout history is not long. Poland and Lithuania had extensive confederation agreements that evaporated with the rise of the Soviet Union. For many years, Norway was part of a confederation with Sweden, and later with Denmark. The United States began as a confederation of thirteen states, and Egypt and Syria created the United Arab Republic (a union of the two countries) in the 1950s. The United Arab Emirates created confederations, albeit not democratic. Benelux and Czechoslovakia were confederations that were replaced by the European Union.

The confederation model, therefore, exists in practice, though it is not widespread. It has succeeded primarily in stabilizing ethno-national relations to some degree, following a period of conflict and war, and thus is a proper “candidate” for entering the debate on the future of Israel/Palestine.

Israel/Palestine – Political Geography

Before discussing how to reconstruct the desired future, we should briefly examine a few questions about the structure of the past and present: What is the political geography of the territory we are discussing? What is the political regime in Israel/Palestine, and how did it come into being? Without answers, progress would rest on shaky grounds. Just like in medicine, diagnosis must precede treatment. So, what are the dominant views on our political geography?

One, and possibly the most common view at the international level, portrays the Israel/Palestine space as a site of struggle between two national movements. This symmetrical approach views Israel as a legitimate homeland of a Jewish nation in which it exercises its sovereignty “like all other nations” after generations of persecution. A similar view is applied to the Palestinians, whose homeland is considered to be the West Bank and Gaza. The main manifestation of the conflict appears in this view to be a long-term border dispute. This approach gives the conflict the symmetry of “Israelis versus Palestinians” by treating Israeli control of the “colonized” (occupied and settled) Palestinian territories as
“temporary,” and by ignoring the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in 1948 and the situation of the Arab-Palestinian minority within Israel, when discussing solution of the conflict. This attitude, which is characteristic of the Zionist left, some Palestinians, and most of the international community, maintains that a stable solution can be achieved in the form of two nation-states on the basis of the 1967 borders.

A different perspective held by most Zionists (in Israel and around the world) sees Israel/Palestine, primarily as the historical-religious homeland of the Jewish people. The process of settling and controlling Palestine is considered a "return" to the “promised” homeland, and a realization of the “historical right”. It is achieved by a 'natural' course of events free of ethical problems, and with almost no mention of the Arab history of the land. The return is to the entire homeland, between Jordan and Sea—a territory belonging to the Jews, and to the Jews alone. Minorities in this view can coexist with Jews, as long as they accept Jewish political supremacy.

In addition, the Zionist view links the need for Jewish sovereignty to recent history of murderous European anti-Semitism, Arab ill-treatment of Jews in the Mideast, and persistent Arab rejectionism. Most Zionists do not ignore that Jewish immigration and settlement created problems for Arabs, but blame Arab intransigence and aggression. At the same time they refuse to recognize Palestinian historical rights to the land, and deny Israeli responsibility for the problems created by the founding of the state and its discriminatory policies. Recently, as a result of political pragmatism, some Zionist rightists became willing to recognize certain Palestinian collective rights, though these rights are far from granting them sovereignty in the occupied territories or full civil and communal equality. Any discussion on questions of return of the refugees, the events of the Nakba, and the Jewish character of the country are taboo in the narrative of this approach.

The prevalent Palestinian perspective, on the other hand, views the space between Jordan and Sea as one political entity, referred to as "Palestine", which was legally created by the British Mandate. However, the newly created would-be state was immediately and unjustly offered to, and settled by foreigners—Jewish colonials. This state was later cruelly partitioned in a process accompanied by massive ethnic cleansing, turning most Palestinians to refugees. According to this perception, Mandatory Palestine was supposed to become an independent Arab state like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt, but was
ultimately divided among various predators—Israel, Jordan, and Egypt. After 1967, the entire land remained in the hands of one conqueror—Israel. The prolonged denial of Palestinian rights, so this perspective holds, has occurred with the support of western imperialist powers.

While this perspective concurs with much research on the history of Israel/Palestine, it also has some glaring blind spots and denials. For example, it conveniently ignores the flight of Jews in Europe and the Arab world (without which one cannot understand their flight to Palestine); it scoffs at the historical and religious connection of Jews to the land; it overlooks the disastrous 1947 Arab rejection of the chance to establish an internationally recognized Palestinian state; and hardly deals with the use of incessant terrorism against Israel. These factors are taboo in the Palestinian narrative, as much as the Nakba and present colonialism are taboo among Zionists.

Today, moderate Palestinians view the struggle for a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and for civil equality in Israel, as worthy politically, but not as historical justice or genuine reconciliation. The current official Palestinian struggle is viewed by moderates as protecting 'the crumbs' left from Palestine for the Palestinians, rather than historical correction. Meanwhile, the one-state solution is rapidly gaining popularity among Palestinians on both the Islamic right and the secular left. This increasing support, and the unlikely alliance it brings from such distant political wings, is due to the potential of the one-state future to achieve justice and historical correction for the Palestinians. However, as elaborated later, both camps tend to ignore that historical justice must consider now a powerful factor that did not exist in the 1940s—the existence of the state of Israel, and the just rights attached to such existence.

My framework seeks to be precise and not polemical in discerning the political geography of the conflict, for which I attempt to combine these perspectives. My analysis shows that Israel/Palestine is indeed a land of religious and historical attachment to Jews, and that Zionism dressed this belonging in modern-political and territorial garb. Zionism, which was a movement of a small minority of the Jewish people until the 1930s, correctly identified the destructive potential of anti-Semitic racism, and sought to create a safe haven for Jews in the historical homeland. Historically, given the ways in which Jews were
stripped of their rights, evicted, and were victims of a genocide, almost before they became Zionists, and inasmuch as most of the Jews who came to Israel had no alternative, one can conclude that Jews were actually “expelled to the homeland”. This observation, somewhat ironically, is ignored by both Zionist ideologists, who wish to make us believe that Jews always longed to return to Zion, and most Arab research and narratives, who wish to portray Jews as 'normal' colonials. As a side comment, and with a touch of sad irony, one can observe that the state of safe refuge created by Zionism, has now become the least safe place for Jews in the world.

Zionism managed to create in the reconstructed Jewish homeland, a strong viable ethno-national community, albeit one that is fragmented unevenly along lines of ethnicity, religion and class. Zionism managed to plant in Zionist Jews a real and legitimate sense of homeland belonging, while politically realizing the right to self-determination of the Jewish-Israeli nation that was actually created anew in the country.

However, these observations, that are closer to the Zionist narrative, do not contradict the Palestinian perspective that the conflict over Israel/Palestine is also the result of a clash between a Jewish colonial society, whose aim is to colonize the land, and its indigenous Palestinian population. The literature defines colonialism as the organized expansion of a group to new territory, generally accompanied by conquest, settlement, appropriation, and exploitation of local population and resources. The current Jewish regime in Israel/Palestine fits this definition. It was established on the foundational process of Jewish expansion, settlement and appropriation, while receiving the general support of world powers, primarily Britain and the United States, which served for long periods as the “metropole” for the Zionist colonization project. Thus, the Zionist-Palestinian conflict is both a clash between colonizers and indigenous peoples, and between two nations battling over the same territory. Any progress towards a solution must take into account this deep structure.

In addition to understanding this structure, and for the sake of precision, we must refine the definitions and point out that over the past century the nature of the Zionist project has changed in significant ways. Until 1947, it could be conceptualized as “colonization by refugees” that developed through the immigration of Jews who were forced out of their previous states due to persecutions and racism. To be sure, there was a small nucleus of
ideological Zionists who came voluntarily, but the majority became Zionists only once their lives in the original homeland became unbearable. Zionism colonization in that period was advanced by using all the loopholes existing under Ottoman and especially British rule—by purchasing and receiving land, erecting settlements, and building a military and demographic force.

Over the next twenty years, the project became one of “internal colonialism,” which includes ethnic expulsion and Judaization of the Israeli territory within the Green Line. After 1967, it changed shades again and became almost classic “state-led” or “external” colonialism in which the state settles its citizens beyond the state’s sovereign borders and seeks to appropriate it. Simultaneously, Israel deepened its liberal-democratic character inside the Green Line, primarily for its Jewish population. This factor aided in building a broad consensus around defining the regime as a “Jewish and democratic state”, while ignoring the eviction, colonialism, and the oppression of the Arab citizens living inside the Green Line, most conspicuously the Bedouins in the south.

In the past two decades, the regime between Jordan and Sea has been transforming into a new stage, I have termed it ‘oppressive consolidation’. Since the Oslo Accords, Israel has sought to stabilize the situation by carrying out strategic withdrawals—from Area A, from Lebanon, and in 2005, from Gaza and parts of the West Bank. In doing this, it has shown a certain willingness to allow the existence of a quasi-state Palestinian unit that would grant a degree of self-determination to the Palestinians, while legitimizing an “agreed-upon solution” that maintains Jewish control over most of the land between Jordan and Sea. To this we can add the proposals for a Palestinian state made by Barak and Olmert, and most significantly by Netanyahu in his 2009 Bar-Ilan speech and several statements following the 2013 elections, vowing to advance towards a situation of "two states, for two peoples".

The present stage marks the weakening of Jewish colonialism in the face of international condemnation, Arab resistance, and the shrinking of direct Israeli rule. Some exceptions exist, such the establishment of outposts in the West Bank or new towns and villages in the Galilee and Negev, but the overall picture is of selective withdrawals. This stabilizing stage is taking place alongside accelerating globalization, development, and the onset of liberal tendencies of the Jewish population inside the Green Line. However, these withdrawals have not changed the structure or ideology regarding the Jewish aspiration to control the
entire space between Jordan and Sea. Rather, at this stage, they constitute only a change in the methods of control over the Palestinians, from direct to partially indirect.

One of the most blatant expressions of the colonization and Jewish control is the issue of land. Israel has been laboring for sixty years on what Sandy Kedar has called “judicial land redemption”, in which Israel has registered more than 93 percent of the country’s territory and some one-half of the land in the West Bank as state land. As a result, the Palestinians, who amount to about one-half of the population between Jordan and Sea, control only some 15 percent of the land area. Inside the Green Line, the situation is worse—the Palestinians constitute 18 percent of the population but control only three percent of the land. This is the tip of the iceberg of deep and structural Judaization, which creates intense pressures and tension. These arise not only because of the prolonged dispossession, but also because the “state” became an entity that, rather than representing the whole population, represents almost exclusively its Jewish citizens.

The regime that characterizes all the stages is one I conceptualize as “ethnocracy” and it has ruled for 64 years inside the Green Line and for 45 years, somewhat differently, between Jordan and Sea. The cultural and economic details of this regime are laid out at length in my books and articles, but here I emphasize the observation that now in Israel/Palestine there is one regime—an ethnocracy that controls, in various means, the diverse populations, consistently giving preference to the Jewish population, and ranking the other groups according to their attitude toward the Zionist project.

However—and here I begin my argument with those who favor the one-state solution—who claim there is already one state between Jordan and Sea. Conceptually, it is necessary to distinguish between regime and state. Although there is one regime with sovereign powers vested in Israel and its institutions, there is not one state, since about half of the inhabitants are not, and apparently will not be, citizens. These people live under military rule or in a temporary status of one kind or another. In any event, this structure contains no political program that will bring all the permanent inhabitants of the area under one law, citizenship, or culture, as in customary in a modern state.

Furthermore, “beneath” the political geography of one colonial regime there are, according to international law, two states—Israel and Palestine. This was reinforced by the well-known 2004 decision of the International Court of Justice in The Hague regarding the
separation barrier, and many decisions of the UN Assembly and of the Arab League for the establishment of Palestine, which is yet to be fulfilled but receives the support of nearly all the international political and legal institutions. The territory between Jordan and Sea is home to two robust national movements that seek to realize their right to self-determination. Therefore, the Jewish ethnocratic regime between Jordan and Sea is not viable and cannot, at this stage, constitute a normative or legal basis for a joint state. We shall return to this later.

This analysis leads me to understand the geopolitical situation in Israel/Palestine as comparable to regimes in which only part of the territory is under their colonial control, and thus illegitimate, while the other parts are under legitimate sovereignty. This is a more complex view of the situation, comparing Israel/Palestine to, for example, the case of Britain in Ireland until 1921, the French in Algeria until the early 1960s; Jordan and the West Bank until 1987; and, recently, the situation in Serbia and Bosnia and Kosovo, Morocco and the Western Sahara, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, and elsewhere. In the past, solutions to such partial colonial conflicts generally arose when the regime retreated from territories it held illegitimately and remained in control of its legitimate sovereign lands. In none of these cases, however, did the illegitimate occupation of territory lead to a threat to the existence of the mother state. This implied by the one-state proponents, who claim that Israel's colonization of the West bank is irreversible. You don’t have to throw out the baby with the bath water.

Returning to the cases of the Israeli regime, we must admit that the analysis offered above is too “clean,” since it is hard to make a clear distinction between the different stages through which the Israeli regime has developed. This situation must trigger warning lights, inasmuch as the current regime continues to institutionalize the colonial situation in the West Bank, in the form described by Lev Grinberg through the oxymoron “democratic occupation”. I may add that one cannot make a clear distinction between both sides of the Green Line since Israel is also colonizing and Judaizing parts of its own legitimate territory, particularly the Negev and the mixed cities, in a process I describe as ‘internal colonization’. 
The result is the gradual institutionalization of “separate but unequal,” and a structural process I have termed “creeping apartheid” that we have witnessed in the past decades. Naturally, Israel does not declare that such a process is in train, and continues to flag the hollow definition of a “Jewish and democratic state,” but it still settles Jews in the West Bank and Arab areas inside Israel, nationalizes Palestinian land, and enacts statutes separating Jews and Arabs in Israel and separating the two groups from Palestinians in the occupied territories. Thus, without formal declaration, Israel is, one step at a time, institutionalizing a de jure (and de facto of course) system that classifies populations between Jordan and Sea based on their ethnic origin and geographic place of residence, and imposes on each group a different system of control and privileges. In other words, as noted, a quiet but continuous and 'thickening' process of 'creeping apartheid'.

This situation, needless to say, poses serious structural danger, but one that can be stopped. The confederation framework can stop it, and return fundamental democratic structure of full and equal citizenship to the entire population, as one would expect of a viable regime in the twenty-first century.

**Return of the One State**

In conjunction with these structural changes, the one-state idea, which had been seriously discussed in the 1930s and ‘40s, arose again. The books of Mazin Qumsiyeh, Ali Abunimah, and Virginia Tilley, published a few years ago, sparked a flood of writing on the subject. The one-state solution claims to guarantee an honorable way out of the contradictions described above. Proponents of the idea argue that Israel's control in the occupied territories (reflected by the settlements, the military deployment, and the infrastructure for the most part) is irreversible and no longer enables establishment of a viable Palestinian state.

The alternative to two states, then, is to treat Mandatory Palestine as one “natural” political unit that will enable all its inhabitants to live in peace. The framework would, the proponents contend, eliminate one of the main obstacles in the conflict—the question of the refugees. The entire land of Israel/Palestine would be open to those who were forced from it. The other heated questions—the settlements and Jerusalem, for example—will be easier to
resolve in the one-state strategy, which will neutralize the ethnic competition over territory, resources, and power that now characterize the relations between the sides.

The one-state idea has various hues. The democratic version offers a secular-liberal, bi-national, or multicultural state. The nationalist brand offers a Jewish or Arab ethnocracy with a sizeable minority; the religious version offers a state governed, interchangeably, by the Muslim Sharia or Jewish Halacha.

On the face of it, the one-state framework has great appeal. It is based on important ethical arguments; it is comprehensive, inclusive, and even elegant. It treats the political territory created by the British in 1917 as the basis future regime, and properly contends that for almost one hundred years (since 1917), with the exception of only nineteen years, the whole country was under one regime (though they do not give proper weight to the fact that, in the course of that nineteen-year period, the legitimate sovereign state of Israel was created).

Proponents of the plan also correctly identify the area between Jordan and Sea as the object of belonging and national aspiration of both Jews and Palestinians, who feel that the entire country is their homeland. A quick look at the Palestinian and Zionist maps, symbols, and publications indicate again and again the image of the entire land of Israel/Palestine as a single unit.

The attractive idea has spread rapidly. In recent years, it has been the most “bon-ton” proposal among Arab academics, and some Jews, primarily outside Israel. Among the Palestinians supporting the idea are researchers such as Nur Masalha, Ghazi Falah, Nadim Rouhana, George Basharat, Assad Ghanem, Ali Abunimah, Mazin Qumsiyeh, Omar Barghouti, Samira Esmeir, Ghada Karmi, Leila Farsakh, Huneida Ghanem, Islah Jad, Saree Makdisi, Azzam Tamimi, Nura Erekat, and Jamil Hilal. It is also interesting to note who has not supported the idea to the best of my knowledge—Samil Tamari, Rima Hamami, Rashid Khalidi, Saleh Abd al-Jawal, Sari Hanafi, Manuel Hassassian, and Beshara Doumani—all prominent thinkers who have refrained, for the time being, to hop on the one-state bandwagon.

The popularity of the idea among Palestinians is not surprising. It fits well with the long history of Palestinian opposition to partition recognition of a Jewish political entity in Israel/Palestine, fueled from the outset with some elements of political Islam. This stance
stood until 1988, when the mainly secular PLO accepted the partition decision and recognized Israel. Since the rise of Hamas in the 1990s, and its victory in the 2006 elections, the Islamic agenda is again salient in Palestinian politics and with it the one-state idea. As we know, most Islamic movements view all of Israel/Palestine as sacred *Waqf*, which must be liberated, sooner or later, peacefully or violently. The one-state agenda fits well with these deep currents in Palestinian spatial imagery and aspiration.

Support for the one-state idea exists to a much lesser degree among Israeli Jews. It includes researchers such as Meron Benvenisti, Yehouda Shenhav, Niv Gordon, Ilan Pappe, Haim Braishit, Gabi Piterberg, and, recently, Yoav Peled. Less important are those who are not proponents, since most Jewish researchers continue to support two states, or even one Jewish state between Jordan and Sea, possibly with a few Palestinian enclaves. There is also international support for the idea, including among prominent researchers who have written extensively on the Zionist-Palestinian conflict, such as Virginia Tilley, whom I have already mentioned, the late Tony Judt, Ron Greenstein, and Judith Butler. Here, too, a number of prominent researchers oppose the idea, some of them critical researchers: Ian Lustick, Joel Migdal, Norman Finkelstein, and Noam Chomsky, for example.

**Critique: Apolitical Political Geography**

I agree with many of the aims and values of the democratic proponents of one state–equality, the creation of a common space for peace and trust, historical justice, and the peaceful reintegration of Israel and Palestine. The state, according to most progressive theorists, is a modern political entity whose goal is improvement of human life. A state–in and of itself–is not a worthy goal unless it advances human welfare. Yet, given the geopolitical settings in Israel/Palestine, and particularly the existence of Israel, the path to conciliation and acceptance cannot, I contend, be achieved by a one-state framework, but through gradual integration by means of two sovereign entities, within a confederation format, as I shall elaborate.

The main problem of one state is–ironically–that the idea is a-political: it does not properly cope with the political, legal, and violent forces holding the system it seeks to change–first and foremost–the existing (Israeli) state. None of the texts I have read offered any
explanation why and how Israel would allow it to be replaced by a new political entity, which would completely change its identity and dramatically reduce the power of its dominant elites. A serious political analysis seeking to bring about change needs to deal with the validity and strength of the apparatuses it aspires to topple. The one-state strategy simply ignores this need.

Let us remember that following the establishment of the United Nations, the right of a state to exist under international law is inalienable. So is its right to territorial integrity and self-determination. These are the very arguments that make Israeli colonialism in the occupied territories illegal: it prevents realization of the Palestinian right to self-determination. But international law also ensures the validity of the Israeli state, which the one-state proponents seek to change completely. The one-state framework clashes with the rights of Israel as enshrined in international law, forming a serious flaw in a process that seeks to bring about political change.

Precedents

From the historical and comparative perspective, a merger of type projected for Israel/Palestine by the one-state solution is without precedent in the present era. The historical record shows that only three unions of two states have been successful since 1945–North and South Vietnam, East and West Germany, and North and South Yemen. Each of these cases, we readily see, involved union of states populated by the same nation of people, previously split as a result of imperial policy. The merger came about with the consent of the peoples in the two uniting states. In contrast, there has never been a successful union of two states of different ethno-national character, certainly not after a century of bloody conflict.

Quite the opposite: partitioning, splitting and devolution of states are more common in world politics than ever before. Since the founding of the UN in 1945, thirty-five states have officially split (not including liberation from a colonial/imperial state, which occurred in some sixty other cases). The splits occurred in a number of principal waves:

(a) The anti-colonial wave and its aftermath, which led to division of the colonies from the metropolitan states, and later to splits within the new states
themselves, such as in India-Pakistan-Bangladesh, Korea, Ethiopia, Singapore-Malaysia, and Cyprus.

(b) The post-Soviet wave, in which primarily the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia were divided; at the same time, a number of states in Asia and Africa were established, among them East Timor and Eritrea.

(c) The “ethnic-conflict” wave of recent years, in which new state-like entities (official or semi-official) have split following bitter ethnic fighting, such as Kosovo, Montenegro, Abkhazia, Ostia, Iraqi Kurdistan, Kashmir, Gaza and South Sudan.

One-state proponents, then, seek to run counter to the grain of history, and create an entity that is without precedent, in which an ethnic state merges with a neighboring rival nation. The lack of precedent does not by itself prevent the one-state option, but one may still ask: why should the first such union occur in Israel/Palestine? Is it reasonable that a state comprised almost completely of (Jewish) refugees and descendants of refugees following genocide be the first to give up its cultural and ethnic dominance? It appears like one-state proponents are not attuned enough to the almost sacred status of the Israeli state in the eyes of most Jews, given their recent historical trauma and the nature of Zionist response to that trauma. In other words, it is hard to imagine any nation giving up its sovereign power, let alone imagine Israeli Jews acting in this way.

Irreversibility?

Another common argument of one-state proponents describes Israelization of the West Bank as irreversible. Indeed, there are now some two hundred settlements and outposts, towns have been founded, infrastructure laid, and industrial areas created, which annexed de facto large sections of the West Bank to Israel.

This thesis is problematic. It is built on an ethnocratic mind-set, which assumes a-priori that every area on which Jews have settled will remain under Jewish sovereignty, and that every Jew must continue living under Israeli rule. This mind-set fits well with the assumptions of the Israeli colonial regime in the occupied territories, but contradicts the long experience of liberal democracies, where minorities live among a majority having a
different culture. Also, a recent report of B’Tselem, which I helped prepare, shows that the gross built-up area of the settlements covers less than two percent of the West Bank. So, despite the attempts of settlers and their supporters to destroy the Palestinian national space, the situation is not irreversible.

I do not ignore the bloody history of conflicts between the settlers and the Palestinians, but I also do not negate the possibility of coexistence with some (although not all) of the settlers, if they accept Palestinian sovereignty and give up their weapons. The confederation framework proposed here makes it easier for them to do this, in return of Palestinian guarantees for their safety and community.

The irreversibility thesis also assumes that, if no Palestinian state is established, there will arise in its place, almost by default, a joint (democratic) state for Israelis and Palestinians. The experience of the past four decades puts a question mark over this assumption. If a Palestinian state is not established, Israel will most likely continue to administer the area, possibly allotting crumbs of sovereignty to Palestinian groups in areas that will continue to function as “Palustans” (Palestinian Bantustans). *The option, then, is not between one state and two, but between reconciliation (based in part on Israeli sovereignty) and deepening apartheid.* It goes without saying that the Israeli sovereignty will apply only within the recognized borders of Israel, the area inside the Green Line, and that Israel must ensure the full rights of the Arab-Palestinian minority in the country, as well as the rights of other significant communities, the foremost being the Haredi (ultra-orthodox) community.

Simultaneously, one-state proponents want to change the boundaries of the political debate, and to depict establishment of a Palestinian state as an arbitrary attempt to *partition* the country, echoing fears that draw on the trauma the Nakba events. This view again ignores the fact that, under current circumstances, establishment of a Palestinian state on all the occupied territories would be, first of all, an act of *decolonization* and not partition. This course of action also leaves open the possibility of recognizing Israel inside the Green Line as a legitimate political entity, after eliminating its colonial components, and upon granting equal citizenship to all its minorities.

*Between South Africa and Serbia*
Another important element of the comparative discourse is the difference between Israel/Palestine and South Africa. One-state proponents often compare the two cases. In both cases, dangerous conditions of racist apartheid developed. But, as I have written elsewhere, apartheid regimes, like all forms of governmental regimes, come in a variety of versions. Hence it's not too strange that different models of apartheid—a regime based on principle of 'separate and unequal'—developed in South Africa and Israel/Palestine.

Geopolitical analysis indicates a significant structural difference: South Africa was created as a single, recognized state that became a member of the United Nations, which at some stage denied citizenship to most of its black citizens. The blacks demanded a return of full citizenship in their state, which eventually was aided by the country's move to democracy. In contrast, the juridical foundation of Israel/Palestine is two states, and Israeli citizenship was never granted, and hence never revoked from the Palestinians of of the West Bank and the Gaza.

A similarity to the South Africa case is found with respect to neighboring Namibia, a territory over which South Africa received an international mandate in 1920. When the mandate ended, South Africa refused to leave and imposed the apartheid laws on that territory. South Africa fought to put down an uprising that broke out in 1973 with international backing. In a situation that recalls the regime over Palestinian territories, the whites living in Namibia received full rights, and were even represented in South Africa's parliament, while the blacks were denied their rights. Following the long period of rebellion and release of Nelson Mandela from prison, South Africa left Namibia, which became independent in 1990.

Patterns of Serbian control over neighboring territories also show some important similarities. For several generations Serbia attempted to dominate surrounding states and regions. Territories held by Serbs outside the Serbian state included sections of Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro, and Kosovo. Following the disappearance of Tito, Serbs enjoyed privileges over other ethno-national groups in these territories. During the 1990s Serbia gradually retreated from these territories, shrinking to its recognized borders, and ending the 'separated and unequal' conditions.

**Political Geography of Morality**
Proponents of one-state justifiably base their arguments on ethical considerations of historical justice and human rights—all highly worthy in the shaping of desirable political future. But at the same time, they tend to ignore countervailing ethical arguments. For example, the dissolution (some may say—disappearance) of a state like Israel (even a “soft” dissolution by uniting it with a neighbor in a way that does not entail occupation or violence) seriously violates the rules of international morality as they exist in the present global political-legal international system. Israel is not “just another” state, but a political entity created by and for refugees after an unprecedented genocide committed against the Jews. The one-state plan will gravely harm a supreme value of international law, and Israeli Jews. Under such circumstances, it is hard to imagine the one-state plan as an option for peace.

Furthermore, in most of the peace frameworks based on one state, such as the One-State Declaration, which most of the proponents have signed, there is no explicit recognition of the Jews’ right to self-determination (except in the writings of Assad Ghanem and Nadim Rouhana). The leading thinkers in this sphere, George Basharat, Ali Abunimah, Omar Barghouti, Mazin Qumsiyeh, Saree Makdasi and Virginia Tilley, for example, and the late Edward Sa’id, relate generally to the one future state as non-sectarian. The collective rights of Jews, for example, in the one-state declaration, arise only from a number of references to “the concerns and fears of the Jews” as a protected religious (or ethnic) minority, or as a protected community (perhaps in accordance with the dhimmi tradition in Islam). In the present reality, the one-state framework, regardless of the ethical rhetoric in which it is wrapped, significantly denies existing and legitimating political rights. I am not referring to privileges that the Jews enjoy (which should be revoked), but to the basic right of self-determination, inside a recognized state. Have the one-state theorists considered if this denial is morally justified?

Another moral issue concerns the following question: is it ethical to demand that Israel, with the traumatic past of its citizens, to lose its state identity for the sake of merging with a state of a nation with which it is in a bitter conflict? A generous interpretation would consider it a naïve demand; showing a lack of historical awareness. A more sinister
interpretation would consider it an attempt to undermine the foundation of Israeli existence. My comments should not be understood as approval for the immoral acts committed by Israel—expulsion, ethnic oppression, settlements, prevention of Palestinian self-determination, and so forth—against which I have fought for decades. But a distinction must be made between a critical analysis of Israel's criminal policies and its existence itself, which should not be a subject for discussion between people interested in reconciliation and peace.

A personal piece of history would shed light on another problematic aspect of the one-state strategy. In the 1960s and ‘70s, my father had extensive ties with Arabs in the Galilee. He had a particularly close relationship with the Shufani family in M’ilia, to which he went for weddings and other family occasions. The family had an elderly uncle who would talk at length about his pre-1948 travels to Beirut and Damascus, (and on the beautiful women there). I remember how he would sigh, again and again: “Lesh fi hadol el-hudood! Ragh’uni li’bilad a-sham!” [“Why do these borders exist ... take me back to ‘greater Syria’ (the area of Palestine-Syria-Lebanon, which was once a seamless political unit).”] This longing for an open Middle East is of course shared by many individuals, including myself. For the private person, the non-political person, open and accessible space is far better than borders and restrictions. But this is a nostalgic hope, not to say illusory, detached from juridical and political settings of our times. Hoping to erase structural or legal elements that came into being since 1948 (such as modern states) is not a political program or serious analysis, but wishful thinking.

In this context, the Jewish researchers often quote the heritage of Brit Shalom, the impressive organization of intellectuals that was active in the country during the British Mandate and worked hard to prevent partition of Mandatory Palestine and for a binational state. Without delving into the fascinating writings of Magnes, Buber, and Schalom, I will mention that there is a big difference between a discussion on a Jewish-Arab state before the founding of an independent Israeli state, and the discussion on that option after the state was established. At present, the one-state solution must entail the negation of Israel's existence as an independent state. This is a major obstacle.

Further—good ideas are not sufficient. To most prominent scholars who deal with the links between theoretical writing and political recruitment, such as Gramsci, Fanon, Lefebvre,
Sartre, Russell, Gandhi, and even Edward Sa’id, the role of the intellectual is, first, to courageously expose publically unjust and oppressive reality. Second, the intellectual must also create a political avant-garde that can be translated into action in the political arena. The intellectual is active in the public arena in the discourse of producing ideas and tools for transformation, liberation, and ending oppression. But these are developed within the spheres of social or political systems. That is, they challenge the institutional powers and the resources through which skewed power relations are determined. Where only esoteric or theoretical thought is involved, Gramsci argues that the intellectual becomes marginal, mired in the swamp of hollow discussions, thereby serving the hegemony that continues to rule unchallenged in the political and economic reality.

This is, of course, an evasive line. It is very hard to assess, in real time, the ability of new ideas to break into the political field. I am convinced that most writers at the forefront of the one-state strategy believe that their efforts are politically influential. Still, since we are involved in a debate about the foundations of the existing geographic-political-legal systems, within which we all work, ideas that seek to make the existence of a legitimate state redundant appear too far from political or legal feasibility, and hence from the ability to jointly mobilize Israelis and Palestinians.

Attitude toward Present Struggles

By its nature, the one-state movement does not take part in contemporary struggles on both sides of the Green Line. Although most of its leading figures certainly oppose all types of oppression, they are in a dilemma since it is harder for them to battle against the expansion of Jewish West Bank settlements, for example, if on the horizon they share a geopolitical goal with these settlements—the prevention of the two-state solution.

Therefore, is there not a danger that the one-state movement would actually assist, with its relative indifference to contemporary Palestinian struggle for sovereignty, in strengthening the oppressive status quo? Wouldn’t the demand for a new political framework enable continuation of Palestinian suffering? Wouldn’t the intellectual journey toward one-state harm the struggle for a Palestinian state and equality for the Palestinian minority inside Israel? These are complex questions that proponents of one state must address.
Take the ‘vision documents’, charted by leading Palestinians inside Israel only a few years ago. These made an uncompromising demand for civil equality and collective rights for Palestinians within Israel, and caused much uproar for demanding (rightly) an end to Jewish hegemony. The documents mentioned the present state of Israel (without the occupied territories) as the political framework, and the basis for their struggle, and hence, as a legitimate entity. But, over the course of just a few years, some of the writers of the vision documents have changed their opinion and now support a one-state solution, meaning that they advocate the establishment of a new political domain and negate their own recent call. This change is surprising, and lessens the credibility of the vision documents.

Another problem is that most proponents of the one-state solution ignore the geographical congruence of the one-state solution with the messianic visions for the future of Israel/Palestine, especially Jewish settlers, and the Hamas. The growing volume of writings on a future democratic one-state solution focuses on human rights, and a benign transition to an all-inclusive democracy. They ignore, however, the very possible scenario that once a single political unit is established from Jordan to Sea, the democrats and liberals may be pushed aside in favor of fundamental religious powers from each nation, vying to fulfill their messianic visions. The leading writers in the field, such as Abunimah, Basharat, Ghanem, Tilley, Rouhana, Shenhav, and Benvenisti, ignore almost completely this dire possibility.

As we know, Hamas won the Palestinian elections and remains firm in its opposition to recognize Israel. Some of the talk is tactical, but some represents deep Palestinian and Islamic aspirations. How can one ignore this plan to turn Israel/Palestine—the framework sought by the one-state proponents—into a Shari’a state? Would it be possible to separate between Hamas’s vision and the vision of the liberal Palestinians for one state? Wouldn’t the possibility of one state increase support for Hamas’s vision among Palestinians? And let us not forget that in Israel too, strong political elements (led by the ruling Likud’s convention) seek to use the same territorial unit, between Jordan and Sea, to create a ‘greater’ Jewish state—ethnocratic or religious. From an ethical perspective, are the advocates of a democracy between Jordan and Sea ready for the possibility that religious or
counter-colonial entities gain control over Palestinian politics, as they have done in many other countries in the Mideast, most notably Iran and Egypt?

I am convinced that the one-state proponents do not intend to cause further suffering in our land, or advance the agenda of messianic and anti-democratic political parties. Most, I assume, seek peace and justice. But a serious discussion must deal with the troubling truth that mobilization for one state induces serious researchers and writers to join the fray, thereby weakening the struggle to end Israeli colonialism and establish a Palestinian state. Simultaneously, the one-state mobilization promotes the geographic agenda of fundamental religious (Muslim and Jewish) movements. These factors significantly reduce the democratic appeal and political feasibility of the one-state vision.

Feasibility

Practically speaking, it is hard to imagine the one-state solution gaining serious momentum. It is of course a type of 'default' destination, hanging over Israel's unending colonial rule, but not a convincing political agenda, for several reasons. First, as already noted, its proponents do not answer the key question: Why would the Jews forgo Israel as the state of the Jewish/Israeli nation? Since approval of Israeli citizens is vital for a democratic process that leads to one state, what sensible or utilitarian reason can be raised to convince Israeli Jews that one state will benefit them when it will almost certainly, sooner or later, have an Arab majority? I leave aside the weighty ethical question of the legitimacy of ethnic considerations in democratic politics. Rather, I ask a practical question, the answer to which is, I believe, clear. Public-opinion surveys taken among Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel indicate that, despite the dissatisfaction with the ethnocracy and oppression in Israel, a stable and large majority prefer the two-state solution. Is it not obvious, then, that most Israelis would prefer, if they had to choose between annexation of the settlements and the continued existence of the state, to shrink geographically rather than become “Isra-stine”?

Furthermore, as it stands now, there is not one official political body, Palestinian or Jewish, that has adopted, as a recruiting and crusade framework, the concept of one *democratic* state (some religious groups support one state, but not a democratic one). This is
understandable, since the framework for discussion so far has been based on the idea of two states as the action plan of the left, and a meeting point for the political elites opposing Israeli control in the occupied territories. However, I may add that the lack of a meaningful movement towards two states, some twenty years after the Oslo Accords, raises serious doubts about the simplistic two-state option. The confederation option is offered below to address this weakness.

Still with practical considerations, what do the one-state proponents demand from the Israeli regime? Give up its control on its accord? Dissolve the Knesset and establish a substitute parliament? And if so, is the Knesset—the sovereign body—expected to dissolve itself? Is the Zionist Knesset supposed to repeal all the Basic Laws and amend the Zionist Declaration of Independence?

Or, alternatively, will the immediate demand be to grant citizenship to four to five million Palestinians and millions of refugees? Will this action be taken by the same Knesset that enacted the racist Citizenship Law? To remind you, even Abir al-Sana, wife of Murad al-Sana, my neighbor and friend from Beersheba, and mother of his children, who was born in Bethlehem, cannot obtain citizenship after ten years of marriage to an Israeli citizen. What will convince the ethnocratic Zionist sovereign to take such actions? Possibly, international pressure can assist, but, as I noted previously, it is highly likely that most Israelis would prefer retreat to losing Jewish sovereignty, and to admitting millions of Palestinians as citizens.

So, at this stage, it is very doubtful, to say the least, that Israel will take these actions. To be sure, Israel acts in a deceptive and cynical manner, “colonizing”. It continues to colonize the West Bank, thereby preventing the establishment of a Palestinian state, and simultaneously shedding crocodile tears over the purported threats to the "fragile and endangered" Jewish state. Here, too, it is clear to most thinking persons that this is self-deception, and that Israel's colonial rule and "creeping apartheid" are not sustainable and must end. However, the battle against Israel's wrongdoing, and in favor of Palestinian rights, must be based on the legitimate foundation of Israel as a state, confined to its recognized borders.

Confederation
Let us return in the remaining minutes to the concept of confederation. The need for such a horizon begins with the justifiable fear of one-state proponents that the Palestinian state will not be genuinely sovereign. It appears that if it ever comes to being, Israeli (and US) policies and demands will devoid it from controlling many aspects of its sovereignty—such as borders, security or water. The deep split between Fatah and Hamas and between the West Bank and Gaza contributes to Palestinian weakness and the grim prospects of establishing a Palestinian state, as an end state strategy.

The classical two-state path is also threatened by structural deficiencies in the citizenship of Palestinians in Israel. The value of this citizenship is being undermined by the prolonged oppression of Arabs in Israel, and of the natural inclination to support their brethren in the occupied territories. This persistent tension is a complex challenge to the internal strength of the Jewish state. The cracks have widened significantly in the Negev, where Israel attempts to remove many unrecognized Bedouin villages, which sit on their ancestors lands; thus deepening the polarization between Jews and Arabs inside the Green Line.

It appears as if these structural difficulties can be resolved, neither by one state, nor by two, but by development of a third space—conceptually and politically—that is located between these options. Such a space combines elements of the other two options, but does not violate the principle of Israeli and Palestinian sovereignty. The confederation option overcomes many of the geographic and security complexities and the complicated historical and community settings in the shared homeland.

Confederation enables progress by maintaining the logic and significant symbolism of two sovereign spaces for two national communities, while developing a “layer” of joint administration on key matters that may include: environment, external security, economy, transportation, immigration, and even a joint body to protect human rights. The confederation model creates a single economic market and freedom of movement for purposes of employment, tourism, trade and even limited residence. The model, in accordance with international law—can rely on the foundation of two states. On this basis, progress can be made to create a functioning system that will not only be economically beneficial for the two nations, it will also advance historical justice for Palestinians and Jews.
The confederation framework, with international support, will enable the two sides to move toward reconciliation. It will be easier for each side to proceed from Point A (the existing colonial ethnocracy) to Point B (reconciliation and inevitable compromise), when both sides see Point C (the confederation arrangement). In this arrangement, the two sides provide each other invaluable assets: Israel allows, at last, Palestinian sovereignty, movement in the entire homeland and economic development; and the Palestinians provide safety for the existence of the Israeli state. Hence, the sovereignty and security of each nation will be profoundly assisted by the existence of joint arrangements that will ensure for coming generations not only their political rights, but also development, water, infrastructures, natural resources, environmental quality and personal security. In other words, realization of full citizenship, security, and development for Israeli citizens entails also realization of those benefits for citizens of Palestine, and vice versa.

According to the framework developed in detail in several articles, the confederation model is based on two sovereign entities in the 1967 borders, in which the laws of Israel and Palestine would apply accordingly. This is accompanied by the establishment of an autonomous and shared capital region in metropolitan Jerusalem/al-Quds (the Capital Region). The Israeli-Palestinian Confederation Council (probably under a different name such as Council of "The Union" or "The Treaty"), elected by citizens of the two states, will be created and empowered to set policies on agreed subjects. Inhabitants of the two states will be guaranteed freedom of movement throughout, for purposes of employment, leisure, trade, and tourism, but without automatic right for long-term residency which will have to be approved by the host state.

Another possibility, raised now and then, is to bring Jordan into the arrangement and develop the Israeli-Palestinian-Jordanian space of joint management of economic, security, and environmental matters. Given the complexity and sensitivity of the proposed setup, and past failures to advance confederations with Jordan, I recommend that in the first stage at least, Jordan will be left out of the equation.

The confederation model is flexible enough to assist the resolution of 'core issues' in the Zionist-Palestinian conflict. As for the Palestinian Right of Return, Israel already recognized the right when it was accepted into the UN in 1949. However, there is no need, I believe, to
demand its current implementation, since it would rectify one injustice by creating another, and would completely change the character of Israel and consequently harm the right of Israelis to self-determination. So I propose that the right of return will be exercised, in the spirit of the solutions reached in most comparable cases, primarily to the nation-state to which the refugees belong—Palestine.

The refugee issue may even offer an opportunity for promoting historic reconciliation: in the name of a new symmetry, Israel will allow residency to Palestinians returnees in a number equivalent to the amount of Jewish settlers remaining in Palestine. Israel's absorption of these refugees will be based on criteria the Palestinians set, which may include, for example, giving priority to refugees from Lebanon, who suffer from harsh living conditions, and to persons born in Palestine prior to 1948.

Regarding Jewish settlements, the confederation model allows most of the settlements to remain, provided they do not challenge Palestinian sovereignty. The objective is to prevent a deep crisis in Israel and mass uprooting, which would undoubtedly have a negative effect on Palestine as well. In researching the recent report by B’Tselem, which I mentioned earlier, we found that the built-up area of the settlements covers one percent of the land area of the West Bank, and the settlements’ built-up surrounding areas, which include necessary infrastructures, cover an additional two and a half percent. In principle, it is possible to include these settlements in the Palestinian state, after they are demilitarized, and the confiscated land is paid for, with the Palestinian state being responsible for their security. The public infrastructure (roads, industrial areas, purification facilities, and so forth) that was built for the settlements will be transferred to the Palestinian state and made available for the use of its inhabitants.

Presumably, as a result of the establishment of Palestinian sovereignty over the settlements, a large proportion of their settlers will leave the West Bank, and Israel will have to make plans for absorbing them. Upon Palestinian consent to allow settlers to remain in their homes, a significant number of them will stay and become residents or citizens of the Palestinian state, reducing the shock to Israeli society and sending an important message, that a new page in Israeli-Palestinian relations has been turned. The ability of a Palestinian state to protect a small Jewish minority will also be a positive step towards genuine reconciliation.
Simultaneously, the confederation plan must promote democratization of Israeli and Palestinian regimes. Israel should be redefined as belonging to the Jewish-Israeli nation as well as the Palestinian minority. Democratization of the space must also ensure full and equal citizenship for the minority population, including a fair share of the state’s resources and budgets, return of confiscated land, recognition of all the Bedouin villages, representation in public institutions, and cultural and educational autonomy. The status of the Arab-Palestinian minority in Israel is crucial to stability of the system, not only because the minority is entitled to these rights, but because internal ethnic conflicts can easily undermine political systems, as has occurred around the world – from Turkey to Thailand, Sri Lanka, Ireland, Cyprus, Spain, Georgia, Iraq, and to India and Sudan.

Returning to a point already mentioned, it is worth repeating that the plan I propose resurrects the political framework of UN Resolution 181, of 1947, which was called at the time “partition with economic union” and established Jerusalem as an autonomous region. True, at the time, the resolution appeared hostile to the Palestinian people and imposed on them harshly. However, in an historic reversal, the confederation scheme allows Palestinians, more than six decades later, to regain most of their political rights, while advancing toward cautious and responsible reintegration of the Israeli and Palestinian spaces. This historical reversal symbolically began on 29 November 2012, precisely 65 years after the original UN decision, when the UN Assembly decided to award Palestine the status of "a non-member state".

To repeat, Resolution 181 is one of the only resolutions regarding Israel/Palestine that was endorsed by both sides–by the Zionists in 1947, and by the Palestinians in 1988. It is worthwhile quoting from the declarations of independence of the two peoples, which relate to the UN resolution in question. The Israeli Declaration of Independence, of 1948, declares:

... by virtue of our natural and historic right and on the strength of the resolution of the United Nations General Assembly, hereby declare the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz-Israel, to be known as the State of Israel.

The Palestinian Declaration of Independence answers it, forty-one years later:

... historical injustice was inflicted on the Palestinian Arab people ... following upon UN General Assembly Resolution 181 (1947)... yet it is this Resolution that still provides
those conditions of international legitimacy that ensure the right of the Palestinian Arab people to sovereignty…

In addition to UN resolutions, the confederation solution will jumpstart what I referred to in my writings as a process of “gradual bi-nationalism,” the vital element for moving our land into a post-colonial and democratic stage on both sides of the Green Line. The two sovereign states, the autonomous Jerusalem region, as well as other urban regions, such as Haifa, Nazareth and Beersheba, would be binational and multicultural.

I do not have time here to discuss the many inevitable problems in implementing the confederation governmental structure. These begin, first and foremost, with security arrangements, and the management of state violence and terror, which requires a lecture of its own. Other key problems will involve the absorption of Palestinians in the Israeli labor markets and the relaxation of civil relations between remaining Jewish settlers and Palestinians in the West bank. The management of Jerusalem, based on equality will also be a major challenge. The many inevitable difficulties can be countered by three key points. First, the confederation framework is flexible and the depth of cooperation is likely to gradually strengthen over time, as security and relations between the sides improve. The confederation model is typically characterized by decentralization, enabling the existence of autonomous regions and diverse and multicultural forms of government, which is suitable for Israeli and Palestinian societies, composed of many different cultural and regional communities. One promising possibility, raised by attorney Hassan Jabarin, is drafting and adopting a democratic overarching-constitution between Jordan and Sea as a foundation for administering Israel and Palestine. Such a constitution will ensure the right to self-determination of the two peoples and also the rights of the individual citizen and of the minority communities, on both sides of the border. The political structure, if based on viable foundations, will lead to the gradual integration of the Israeli-Palestinian space, possibly leading, later down the road, to the making of a federation.

Second, the proposed model allows for a gradual decentralization of many aspects of governance into metropolitan spaces, which would reflect the high degree of urbanization in Israel/Palestine. The urban scale is promising, as it neutralizes the “burden” of historical, religious and territorial issues, so dominant in other scales. We can picture, for
example, such functioning metropolitan regions around Nazareth-Karmiel, Haifa, Nablus, Ramallah, Gush Dan, and Beersheba, along with the autonomous metropolitan region of Jerusalem/al-Quds. Urban spaces are generally open and encourage movement and mixing; they can introduce more direct, inclusive and democratic forms of government less dependent on fixed identities; they can reorient public discourse to present future issues, rather than burdening history and identity.

Third, confederation opens the possibility for novel and original thinking that may rekindle the hope for peace which has been all but extinguished over the past decade. The framework proposed here provides a better (albeit imperfect) answer to the deep problems of the conflict than the other proposed solutions, in a way that does not impinge on Israeli or Palestinian sovereignty, which still forms the basis for global political-geographic order. Most importantly, the proposed arrangement entails acceptance of Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian sovereign entities, not only in our homeland but throughout the Mideast—two objectives for their attainment no stone should remain unturned.

Yes, the confederation path sounds utopian, for the time being. Yet, it enables us to imagine and plan a third space, post-colonial and democratic, between the polarized and unachievable one- and two-state solutions. It also allows the mobilization of wide public support among both Israelis and Palestinians, unattainable by all other political agendas. Under confederation, Israel and Palestine will be able to advance toward real reconciliation, for which generations of Palestinians and Israelis have been yearning in their shared homeland. The path to realizing this horizon may be best captured by the gentle words of the poet Yehuda Amichai, “the two of us together, and each one of us alone.”

Postscript:

Since the lecture, conditions for peace in Israel/Palestine continue to be confusing. On the one hand, the Israeli government has sustained its unabated colonization of the West Bank, and deepened its attempts to control Israel’s Palestinian citizens, most notably the Bedouins in the south. On the other hand, Prime Minister Netanyahu reaffirmed his (vague) commitment to a ‘two states for two nations’ solution, and agreed to resume peace negotiations with the Palestinian Authority, still headed by Mahmoud Abbas. On the
Palestinian side Hamas maintains its rejectionist position to recognition of Israel, while opinion polls show growing Palestinian support for the one-state solution. Israel’s elections, held in early 2013, did not bring a major change on the Palestinian issue, returning Netanyahu to power, with a slightly modified coalition. The new government appears to promote both further liberalization of economy and society and continued colonization of Palestinian territories. The stalemate has thus not broken, causing a growing sense of despondence among both nations. It appears as if the confederation idea outlined above is one of the only viable options to break the deadlock. During the last year, a group of Palestinians and Israelis, including the author of this paper, was formed to promote the idea. The group plans to produce a series of documents and public debates, in an effort to inject new life into the effort to transform the colonial setting in Israel/Palestine into a process of reconciliation and peace.

Professor Yiftachel teaches urban studies and political geography at Ben-Gurion University, Beersheba. He has published over 100 articles and ten authored and co-edited books, including Ethnocracy: Land and Identity Politics in Palestine/Israel (2006), Planning as Control: Policy and Resistance in Divided Societies (1995), and Indigenous (in)Justice (co-author, 2012). Yiftachel serves on the editorial boards of such journals as Urban Studies and the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies. He has taught at a range of universities, including the University of Melbourne, Columbia University, the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Cape Town. He is also chair of B’Tselem, an Israeli NGO that monitors human rights violations in the Palestinian Territories.

Further readings:


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