

Two-state Israel-Palestine solution is fading to one

As decades of peace negotiations sputter, and Palestinians and Jewish Israelis lose faith in a two-state solution, the question remains: what's the alternative?



KEVIN FRAYER / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE PHOTO

A Palestinian walks past Israel's separation barrier on his way to pray in Jerusalem's Al mqsqa Mosque. The barrier is a symbol of the obstacles to peace efforts in the region.

By: [Olivia Ward](#) Foreign Affairs Reporter, Published on Fri Apr 03 2015

There has seldom been a worse moment for a Middle East peace deal that would create a viable Palestinian state living harmoniously side by side with Israel. Last month, Benjamin Netanyahu told prospective voters that he would [never accept a Palestinian state](#) on his watch. He stepped back after the Israeli election, but few on either side believed him. Then the Palestinians joined the International Criminal Court, taking advantage of their [upgraded UN status](#) as a non-member “observer state.” But neither friends nor foes believed it brings them a millimetre closer to actual statehood.

As decades of negotiations for a two-state solution sputter, and both Palestinians and Jewish Israelis lose faith, the question hanging over the troubled region is what's the alternative. If a two-state solution is doomed, could a one-state solution be the outcome by default?

That would mean Israel would annex and govern all of the Palestinian territories, including the West Bank and Gaza, and their residents become Israeli citizens: the end of Israel as a Jewish state. The blow to both Jewish and Palestinian aspirations horrifies people on both sides, but it inspires others as the only way forward.

“There is no one-state solution,” says Israeli lawyer Daniel Seidemann, an expert on Jerusalem. “It’s a one-state reality. Netanyahu has contributed much in word and deed to destroying the two-state solution. But it doesn’t create an alternative.”

Seidemann, who advocates two states, says a Jewish-Palestinian state is “like a unicorn. It’s an ideal of the ideological Palestinian left or the utopian Jewish left. It may look lovely in a drawing book, but it’s not in nature.”

But Gideon Levy, a columnist for the liberal Israeli daily Haaretz, who has covered life in the Palestinian territories for 25 years, argues that while “it’s not an easy solution, it is the only solution left. And if that is the case, the whole question is would it be a just regime or an apartheid regime.”

Unless Palestinians were to have equal rights with Israelis — to live, travel and work where they pleased, vote in Israeli elections, and have access to all of Israel’s public services in both Arabic and Hebrew — one-state supporters say the democracy that Israel prides itself on would be undermined. The alternative would be two classes of citizens, with Palestinians forming a permanent underclass. Opponents of one state are equally convinced it would be the end of Israel itself.

No solution looks easy. The mistrust between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians has grown over the past two decades, with suicide and rocket attacks on Israel, catastrophic bombing of Gaza, the building of a separation barrier — between the two sides and the steady expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

Attitudes on both sides have hardened. Last year a poll by the centrist Washington Institute for Near East Policy showed that Palestinians oppose a two-state solution [by more than a 2-1 margin](#), opting for one Palestinian state “from the river to the sea.”

In Israel the results of the recent election strengthened Netanyahu’s hand by drawing votes from far-right parties, but only after he moved his own platform farther to the right and appeared to reject a two-state solution.

A joint Israeli-Palestinian poll last December showed a [drop in support among Israelis](#) for a two-state solution to 50 per cent, from 54 per cent in 2013. Each side, it found, perceives the other as a threat to its existence.

After the failure of the 1993 Oslo accord that launched the peace process, Palestinians are increasingly skeptical, says Palestinian Canadian lawyer Diana Butto, a former adviser to Palestinian peace negotiators.

“There’s no single Palestinian party that advocates one state, but the numbers are rising in the opinion polls,” she says.

Much of the zeal is for equal rights with Israelis, says Butto. “In the past people would say, ‘I want my own flag, my own state.’ Now more are saying, ‘Why should I be confined in this tiny area?’ They want the right to equality, to travel, to live in one country.”

Obtaining equal rights would be difficult in a country where Israelis would have much to lose, including decades of political power. Some supporters maintain that the increasingly active “boycott, divestment and sanctions” movement could convince Israelis to create an equal society, following the line of anti-apartheid campaigners against South Africa.

On the Israeli side, one state has some surprising support at the top. President Reuven Rivlin is its most prominent backer, and believes it would rid Israel of the stigma of occupation and repression.

“He is the highest-ranking advocate among Jewish Israelis for the civil rights of the Palestinians both in Israel and in the occupied territories,” says David Remnick in the [New Yorker](#), adding that Rivlin has been threatened and pilloried as a traitor for his views.

For many Israelis, and supporters in the diaspora, they are untenable.

They warn that the Palestinian population would grow to equal or surpass that of Jewish Israelis, and fiercely defended Jewish identity would be lost. They also worry that the right of return would bring back millions of exiled Palestinians. And regardless of numbers, many see Palestinians as a fifth column of potential saboteurs.

Since the Nazi Holocaust, Israel has been regarded as a refuge for Jews. “There are (dozens of) Islamic nations in the world and only one little Jewish state,” says Avi Benlolo, who heads the Canadian branch of the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

“There is only one land for the Jewish people, where religion can be celebrated, the language is Hebrew, where they cannot be expelled and where they don’t have to deal with anti-Semitism.” But now Israel is up against 21st century challenges, says [Ari Shavit](#) in his book *My Promised Land*. It is facing foes who are fiercer, friends who are growing disenchanted by the occupation and failure to find a peace deal, and the threat of international isolation.

“In recent years there is growing pressure on the very core of Israeli democracy,” Shavit writes. “Occupation takes its moral toll ... Ongoing occupation, ongoing conflict and the disintegrating code of humane Zionism are allowing dark forces to menace the nation.”

With the prospect of two states receding, and the default alternative of one state looming, says Seidemann, “we’re sipping cappuccino on the edge of a volcano. Israelis have been living in deluxe occupation and a state of clinical denial — it’s a narcotic. Those who are deeply concerned for the Jewish people and Israel’s security need to tell us that.”

If there is hope for a two-state solution, he says, it will begin with outside pressure, including from countries like the U.S. and Canada. “Our friends must say, ‘You are engaged in policies that are self-destructive.’”

“I believe in the fundamental decency of Israelis and Palestinians. We are both better than our current leaderships. We have to find a way to revitalize those channels (for a peace settlement.) It is not a lost cause, but we are in dire circumstances. We’re not going to seriously engage until we’re told unpleasant, unvarnished truths about where this is going. What we are facing is not a routine crisis.”