

Israel and the Palestinians: A Land for All



by *Hanan Schlesinger*

OPINION



The Western Wall and Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

Those who see the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a purely political dispute over self-determination, territory, and security are missing the bigger picture. At its root, this is a conflict over identity in which religion plays a major role.

Territory in this part of the world is not just an inanimate object that can be bargained over and divided up. It is intimately connected to heritage and identity.

Palestinians claim that they have a common history and localized Islamic sub-identity. In their consciousness and their lived experience, the whole land from the “River to the Sea” is Palestinian. In its very essence, it is Palestine. Israeli Jews claim that we are members of a historical people and that the same entire land is our homeland. It is the Land of Israel in its very essence.

For many of us, Jews and Palestinians, our essential identity is bound up with the land.

Most Palestinians believe that there is a Jewish religion but no Jewish people. In their view, Zionism was created during the 19th century as a colonial movement to usurp Palestinian land. It is fundamentally evil and illegitimate.

Many Israelis believe that there are no Palestinians, only Arabs, as demonstrated by the fact that there has never been a Palestinian state. Palestinian identity is fake, manufactured only to deny our Jewish connection to the land.

Each people denies the other’s very existence and connection to the land.

Clearly, political negotiations and new political thinking are not enough to solve this conflict. First, or at least concurrently, there needs to be mutual acceptance of the other, recognition that the other is who he claims to be. We need a process that heals the hubris of exclusivity and reconciles our identities.

This is the place for track-two diplomacy, and grassroots people-to-people work. This includes social interaction, learning the other’s language and culture, facilitated dialogue that allows deep listening and values clarification, and a large dose of interfaith study.

But for many, such reconciliation efforts appear to be futile and even counterproductive without a political horizon that energizes, inspires, and allows for realistic hope in a better future. But what political horizon could there be when both

Palestinians and Israelis claim the same whole land?

The classic two-state solution is clearly off the table. Not only because it no longer appears viable, but because it fundamentally disrespects both peoples' historical understanding of themselves and their connection to the land. In a political sense it denies the Palestinians 78% of their historical homeland, but much more importantly, it denies that the 78% is in any sense at all Palestine. It rips to shreds foundational Palestinian identity and constitutes a stinging slap in the face to Palestinians around the world (as well as in the West Bank and Gaza) who know themselves to be refugees yearning to come home. And it denies the Jews 22% of their historical homeland, as if to say that most of the inheritance of the tribe of Judah and a good part of what was once within the borders of the Kingdom of Israel is not what we know it to be.

But the one-state solution is also a non-starter, for many Palestinians and even more so for Israelis. The Zionist project, the crown jewel of Jewish identity for the past 100 years, is about nothing if not about a Jewish state, whose majority population is Jewish and whose language and culture are Hebrew.

If not two states and not one state, then what? We have seemingly come to a dead end.

We must escape from binary thinking. The solution may be the "Two States One Homeland" model, which takes the best of each of the two approaches to create a more realistic hybrid. First and foremost, it digs deep into this conflict to address not just the political symptoms but also the core conflict of identities. It finds a way to recognize that the whole land between the Jordan and the Mediterranean is both Israel and Palestine and that both sides have deep belonging and full rights in all of the land.

This model envisions a type of confederation between two

sovereign states. It parts ways with the classic two-state solution based on the concept of separation, and rather creates a reality of two interconnected and intertwined states. While each state is independent and self-governing, they are joined at the hip in a confederation that has its own organs of central government. The confederation creates the conceptual reality of one shared space between the “River and the Sea” that is both Israel and Palestine.

The most salient practical expressions of this conceptual reality are freedom of movement and freedom of residence.

Freedom of movement means that, while there is a sovereign marked border, citizens of either country — citizens of the confederation — can move seamlessly between one side and the other without interference.

Freedom of residence means that — within the framework of a formula of parity — citizens of Israel can permanently reside within the borders of Palestine and citizens of Palestine can permanently reside within the borders of Israel. Residency will not require and will not result in citizenship. National taxes will be paid to the country of citizenship while municipal taxes will be paid locally.

These two elements will give expression to the deep sense of both Israelis and Palestinians that the whole land is theirs, that their homeland and heritage have not been ripped away from them. This, without taking away from each side their national self-determination in their own sovereign state.

Peace will no longer be the enemy of identity nor the nemesis of religion.

Furthermore, those people on both sides most deeply connected to their people’s narrative will no longer have to sacrifice their experience and their dreams.

Palestinian refugees will be able to return not only to the State of Palestine but to the State of Israel as well, in many cases to the geographic locale from which their families hail. They will not

constitute a demographic threat to the Jewish State because they will not become citizens but only residents, while their right to citizenship will be realized in the framework of the Palestinian state. Jewish settlements will not be uprooted, for the settlers will stay where they are, as residents of Palestine and citizens of Israel.

Israelis want security, Palestinians want freedom. The classic two-state solution foundered because — among other reasons— more freedom for the Palestinians meant less security for the Israelis. The “Two States One Homeland” model steps out of the paradigm that created that zero-sum game. The dangers to Israel of an open border or of return of the refugees —prospects that are anathema today to Israeli voters — are neutralized not by a wall or weapon, but by acknowledging and satisfying the existential needs of the Palestinians. Likewise, the settlers become not another tool for wresting land from Palestinian control as they are seen today, but an acknowledgement of the deepest elements of Jewish identity. Full acceptance of the other side — reconciliation — becomes the knife that cuts the Gordian Knot.

Today, twin barriers make this vision impossible – a mutual lack of grassroots trust and empathy for the other side, and a lack of political will on the part of both leaderships. Grassroots peace building between the two estranged peoples that engages the full identity of the two sides, to which the [Roots Initiative](#) and similar people-to-people initiatives have dedicated themselves, can slowly but surely surmount the first hurdle. The second can gradually be overcome by articulating and strongly advocating for the vision itself, as is being done today in both Israel and Palestine by the [Land for All](#) movement.

Transforming this vision into reality will be challenging. It will require all the ingenuity, resourcefulness, determination, and patience that both peoples can muster. But there is no other

realistic way forward.

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