BETWEEN MYTH AND REALITY: THE PALESTINIAN

POLITICAL ELITE AND THE TWO-STATE SOLUTION

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ABSTRACT

Although the two-state solution originated as a concession to preponderant political realities (specifically Israeli military superiority and international political pressures), it has subsequently become detached from any semblance of reality. While the two-state framework remains an article of faith for the Palestinian leadership, the day-to-day existence of West Bank Palestinians approximates more closely with an apartheid (one-state) reality. In interrogating this Janus-faced construction, the subsequent article seeks to establish whether the peace process should be re-interpreted as a manifestation of deeper divides and splits within the Palestinian body politic

Introduction

At a time when the form, utility and relevance of the nation-state are increasingly challenged at the global level, this political form conversely retains an unquestioned pre-eminence within the limited context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Through a long, tortuous and frequently contradictory process, the terms of this consensus have incrementally enfolded around a two-state solution; the terms of which are so embedded that any alternative appears almost as an affront to the politically permissible.

In the face of such a deeply embedded framework, it is sometimes easy to forget that Israeli acceptance of a Palestinian state, and by implication a full acceptance of Palestinian political and national rights, only fully consolidated relatively recently (with the 2002 Roadmap for Peace). Given that the two-state solution and the Palestinian National Authority (henceforth alternately referred to as the PNA, PA or Palestinian Authority) are so inextricably interwoven, it is entirely unsurprising that the latter retains an unyielding fidelity to this political settlement. What is perhaps more surprising, especially given its ostensible failures (both past and present), is the extent to which the two-state process continues to retain broader levels of support and engagement.

In engaging with this apparent anomaly, it is not my intention to distinguish the respective merits of the one-state and two-state solution or to discuss alternative models to the two-state solution in great depth or detail–this has already been done in considerable detail elsewhere (see Baraka 2005; Karmi 2011; Lustick 1993; Shikaki 2012; Sussman 2004). When these alternatives are referenced, it is usually to highlight the existence of alternatives to the two-state discourses (these alternatives are not consequently enlarged or developed to any great extent).

In beginning from a position of expressed scepticism, this article instead seeks to ascertain whether the two-state solution should be predominantly interpreted as a symptom of deeply embedded weaknesses (or fractures at the level of Palestinian elite opinion) rather than as a framework that is geared toward genuine reconciliation and empowerment; in other words, should the persistence of the two-state solution be attributed to, and largely interpreted within the context of, the continued Palestinian failure to achieve national unity and consensus?

Methodology

The following article essentially derives from a set of interviews1 (with members of Fatah, Hamas, Popular Front, People’s Party, Palestinian Democratic Union and PNA and PLO leaders). Interviewees were not chosen at random, and the final range of participants instead broadly reflects my conscious intention to ensure as complete a representation (of Palestinian elite opinion) as possible. The interviews were semi-structured: this allowed for more flexibility, enabled me to generate more questions during the course of the interviews and ensured that the interviews flowed more naturally.

Interviews were conducted in person or, when this was not possible, via telephone. The majority of interviewees were previously acquainted with the interviewer or friends of the interviewer. The interviews were

1 Personal interviews are referenced in relation to Appendix A (see the appendix for a list of interviewees); in contrast, separate interviews which the respondents have given (to other individuals/publications) are indicated both in the references and by the relevant year.

also conducted in a relaxed, friendly and informal manner (my Palestinian nationality provided a common point of reference) and the questions were consciously presented in an accessible form that made it easier for the interviewee to engage and relate their personal perspectives.

General Overview

Divisions amongst the Palestinian political elite have long been understood to impact outside of the Palestinian political context, most notably upon Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. As a consequence it is broadly acknowledged that the absence of a unified political front has aggravated existing weaknesses and contributed to a situation in which Palestinian negotiators have been placed at a relative disadvantage in relation to their Israeli counterparts.

The ramifications of political disunity have already been discussed in considerable depth (most notably by Ghanem 2010; Hilal 2010). Equally, the extent to which Palestinian divisions have inhibited the potential of peace has similarly benefitted from repeated engagement. In contrast, the question of whether the peace process itself (and its concomitant two-state emphasis) is the effect of these internal weaknesses has received rather less attention.

The article takes political divisions as its point of departure and accordingly begins, in the form of Sources of Division: The Internal Dimension, with a consideration of the domestic (Palestinian) context. As continued relations of dependency and patronage attest, any such consideration of the internal (Palestinian) context must simultaneously recognise the overwhelmingly negative impact of external assistance, whether political or economic in character Sources of Division: The External Question engages externalisation and extrapolates related themes.

Sources of Division: Israeli-Palestinian Relations similarly conceives of

externalisation (defined, for the purposes of this article, as the various ways in which external influences resonate as internal tensions although in this instance within the context of bilateral relations.

The Peace Process: Image and Reality posits that each element in combination has cumulatively informed an abrupt disjuncture between appearance (the various representations that are a product of relations between the respective actors) and reality (the lived experience/s of ordinary Palestinians). Although established as a structural feature of the peace process from the outset, this divide has become steadily more pronounced, to the extent that reality and representation no longer correspond and increasingly appear as diametric opposites.

In the face of this political reality the predominant response, on the part of elite actors, has been to retreat into denial–thus perpetuating the deceits, evasions and misrepresentations that have sustained the peace process to date. In contrast, those actors who assert the rights of the dispossessed and marginalised as the starting point of any meaningful peace have increasingly sought to break out of the confines of the two-state approach.

Even actors who one might otherwise suppose–upon the basis of their expressed sentiments and actions–to be unremittingly hostile to the prospect of a one-state resolution, have increasingly come to recognise that events may be assuming a momentum of their own. These developments, along with the diminishing prospects of a two-state solution, are discussed in A New Dimension: The Demise of the Two-State Solution? and A New Dimension: Resurrecting the One-State Approach. A concluding section then briefly reconciles each of the preceding threads.

Sources of Division

1. The Internal Dimension

Relations between the leadership of Fatah and Hamas were tense and problematic even prior to the 2007 Hamas seizure of Gaza (in the aftermath of 2006 elections for the Palestinian parliament), as is shown by the fact that the Prisoners’ Document (which was signed by members of Fatah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the PFLP) on 11 May 2006) preceded the 2007 crisis. Initially conceived as a basis for social and political reconciliation, the document appeared to anticipate Hamas’ full endorsement of the two-state solution (although Israel was to subsequently to reject the document upon the basis that it did not accord with the Roadmap’s pre-conditions for negotiation). From an internal perspective, Hamas’ ostensible acceptance of the PLO’s indivisible right to function as the sole representative of the Palestinian people (Hilal 2010) was of equal significance.

There have been many attempts to bring about reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. The most successful culminated in the Mecca (2007), Doha and Cairo (both in 2012) agreements. These initiatives attempted to inaugurate rapprochement upon a number of levels whether in the form of internal/electoral reform, the formation of a government of national unity or the arrangement of national elections. However in spite of considerable effort, the gulf between the two parties remains considerable.

This fact notwithstanding, it is nonetheless apparent and here I extrapolate from the interviews that I conducted that a strong body of opinion is opposed to the PNA’s dissolution. This view extends even to Hamas, who one might presuppose to be unremittingly hostile to its continued existence. Ghazi Hamad (Appendix A), Hamas’ deputy foreign minister, was clear in rebutting this assumption:

Dissolving the PNA is not practical now and will lead to consequences. Such a step should be well planned. The PNA took over the responsibility of the occupation {for functions} such as health and education. The dissolving of the PNA contradicts the bid to be a member of the UN.

Hamas spokesman Salah Bardawil (Appendix A) adds that his organisation’s ostensible acceptance of the two-state option, which Khalid Meshaal (the leader of his party’s political bureau) had anticipated as far back as 2009 (El-Khodary and Bronner 2009), should be conceived as an act of political expediency:

We accepted the Palestinian state on the 1967 borders because it is part of our rights and historical Palestine. We supported the UN bid because we did not want to be an obstacle {to} what {has been} called the national achievement; we did not want to abuse the atmosphere of reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. But we do not support an observant nonmember state without authority.

These oscillating push-pull impulses are also implicitly referenced in Ghazi Hamad’s (Appendix A) reference to ‘seasonal’ reconciliations. Thus, while there appears to be a general consensus upon the desirability of national unity, there are nonetheless underlying or external factors that periodically militate against this outcome.

To take just one example, the principle of resistance, which previously functioned as a unifying symbol in the Palestinian struggle against occupation and oppression, now constitutes a source of disunity. Given the radically different challenges that Gaza and the West Bank face, it is near-impossible to see how Fatah’s continued commitment to conciliatory modes of engagement can be reconciled with Salah Bardawil’s (Appendix A) insistence upon ‘inalienable rights’, ‘historical rights’ and ‘struggle/resistance’.

Even in instances where negotiations between the two parties have yielded compromise (or, at the very least, the possibility of compromise), the imminent possibility of fracture or breakage periodically lurks beneath the surface; thus, any ostensible convergence upon the two-state solution is routinely thrown into doubt by Hamas’s insistence that any such agreement can only be a transitory stage which anticipates the ultimate realisation of maximalist political designs. A similar divergence also prevails in relation to national elections. In conventional political theory, elections are valued as a means through which the popular or national will is constituted and expressed; however in the Palestinian context, the reality is diametrically opposed - elections conversely impede the emergence of national consensus. Bardawil (Appendix A) expands this theme further:

Our philosophy of the reconciliation is to unite our efforts to resist. For Abu Mazen [the elections aren’t] primarily about struggle[ing] against the occupation; rather, they are about activating negotiations. Elections should be part of a comprehensive plan that unites the Palestinian security apparatus and reform[s] the PLO.

Palestinian leaders largely acknowledge the division’s negative consequences and frequently link it to the PLO’s inactivity. Sufian Abu Zaida (Appendix A), a member of Fatah’s Revolutionary Council, however, believes that:

There are efforts to achieve national unity and to reform the PLO and its institutions. However, these two goals are not really linked. There is a committee that is responsible to follow up the elections of the {Palestinian National Council} that {has not moved} one step.

This point notwithstanding, it is essential to recognise the sheer scale of these largely procedural obstacles. Thus, even if it were possible to surmount the aforementioned difficulties, there still remain practical and logistical difficulties which pertain to electoral legitimation. Hanna Amireh (Appendix A), the PLO Executive member, consequently correctly affirms that ‘the dispersal of Palestinians across different Arab states simultaneously imposes logistical and practical impediments upon full legitimisation through elective processes’.

Despite the ostensible consensus which holds that splits upon more substantive issues are detrimental to Palestinian interests, it is clear that some actors benefit from the continuation of the split. Thus, Hanna Amireh (Appendix A) observes that:

The division between Fatah and Hamas is irreversible now. {It} is almost impossible to reach a unity with full assimilation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. There is a division in interests {that sustains} the status quo {in order to} preserve power and authority.

Zahira Kamal (Appendix A), the General Secretary of the Palestinian Democratic Union, expresses similar scepticism when she notes that Hamas is waiting for the Arab Spring to run its course before making its intentions clear; continuing in this vein, Nabil Amr (a former Minister of Information and Fatah Leader) and Saeb Erekat (the chief Palestinian negotiator who played a pre-eminent role in the establishment and consolidation of the two-state solution), similarly concur that personal interests (whether political or economic in character) are frustrating efforts at national reconciliation and acting to the detriment of the Palestinian national interest (Appendix A).

2. The External Question

The Palestinian Authority, as currently constituted, is clearly not open to initiatives that reject the two-state status quo or which, as a corollary, seek to foster alternative approaches/solutions. At an international level, its stance (and indeed its own existence) is further buttressed by the support of Israel, the US and prominent international organisations/institutions. This support should not be understood as an indication of the PA’s equivalent status; far from it. In direct contrast to their highly conditional assistance to the Palestinian Authority international actors have proven to be rather more accepting of Israeli deviations from the standard script.

During the 2002 negotiations that would eventually culminate in the Road Map for Peace, the international Quartet (Russia, the US, the EU and the UN) initially called upon the Israeli government to freeze settlement construction, and suggested that this gesture of good faith would presage a genuine two-state solution. The Israeli government rejected this proposal, and instead insisted that ‘security’ must be a precondition for any further negotiations. The final document strongly stressed the importance of fighting ‘terrorism’ and ultimately collapsed in mutual recriminations and ignominy, amidst US claims that the Palestinian political leadership constituted a roadblock to further progress.

In keeping with this model, in which unilateral Israeli demands underpin an ostensibly neutral, reciprocal and balanced process, subsequent peace initiatives have strongly reiterated the obligations that adhere to the Palestinian leadership (usually the cessation of violence and incitement to violence. More recently, these conditions have extended to the demand that the PNA recognise Israel as a Jewish state (a theme that was reiterated in Netanyahu’s 2009 Bar Ilan speech.2

Although most objective observers agree that sustained US engagement remains a precondition for the resolution of the conflict, it still remains far from clear that the US has the ability, or even the will, effectively to fulfill this role. A recent publication by Rashid Khalidi (2012) is instructive in this respect–Khalidi re-engages the continued bias within US policy and thereby explodes the notion that the incumbent administration should be conceived as an impartial negotiator or mediator. His concluding remarks are strikingly pessimistic–in refusing the naïve utopianism which has frequently disfigured the official peace process most notably in its initial stages, he asserts that a resolution will elude all parties until an effective power or coalition forces the US to adapt/overhaul its existing policies.

2 Full text of Netanyahu’s foreign policy speech at Bar Ilan in Haaretz, 14 June 2009, at: http://www.haaretz.com/news/full-text-of-netanyahu-s-foreign-policy-speechat-bar-ilan-1.277922.

There are few signs that the incumbent administration has any intention of breaking with the bi-partisan consensus (upon Israel). In 2009, President Obama hosted Benjamin Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas, the incumbent Israeli Prime Minister and Palestinian President; prior to the meeting, Obama observed that: ‘We cannot continue the same pattern of taking tentative steps forward and then stepping back’.3 Since making this declaration, his administration has proceeded to do precisely that during his latest visit to Israel, Obama did not unveil a plan to break the deadlock or even demand a cessation of Israeli settlement activity.

US engagement with the issue has remained hesitant and halting, even in the aftermath of the steadfastly pro-Israel Bush administration: to this extent, the incumbent administration continues effectively to reward Israel for its defiance of international law, and has done little or nothing to oppose settlement expansion or enforce Palestinian human rights.

Any alignment between the respective actors should not be understood as an indication of pre-eminence or equivalence; far from it. The PA’s relative disadvantage is routinely reinforced by the coercive diplomacy of the US and other patrons; deeply embedded external dependencies have been further entrenched by a declining base of internal political support. The PA’s inability to address the continued abuses that arise from the occupation has negatively impacted upon internal legitimacy and reinforced reliance upon external sources of support and funding.

Even if it were willing to alter this pernicious status quo, the Palestinian Authority is not a position to make demands or to reassert its (supposed) authority. This is as true of its relationship with Israel as it is of its relations with other external parties. In addition, general structural weaknesses and poor levels of performance (which originate in both internal and external sources) continue to undermine broader efforts to develop a unified programme and strategy that is clearly attuned to political realities and existing challenges (Khalidi 2006, Chapter 5).

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The PA’s status as an essential proxy (or conduit for the channeling of external influence) is further underscored by its difficult external relations with Israel. This is a particularly important consideration as successive Israeli governments have shown little compunction in taking actions that are detrimental to the PNA’s internal legitimacy or which severely prejudice the progression of the broader peace process. Despite this, and even as attendant limitations, tensions and logical contradictions are manifested, the PA’s faith in the official peace process remains steadfast

3 Transcript of remarks by Barak Obama in Washington Post, 22 September 2009.

and apparently unyielding. Nabil Amr (Appendix A) has expanded upon the reasoning which anticipates this apparently perverse position:

The two-state solution is more realistic and it is a compromise between the people of Israel, who established their state and the Palestinians who are looking for a state. {In addition,} the international community {has adopted} the two-state model as a solution’.

Hassan Asfour (Appendix A), the former PA minister who played an important role in the secret talks that preceded Oslo, concurs that the

Oslo agreement is still valid {and} endorsed by the international community. {As} Palestine is a UN member final status issues will be negotiated on {a} different basis. The question is {no longer} whether Israel accepts or rejects the establishment of a Palestinian State. Israel will be {put} under pressure to comply with the UN resolution and the peace agreements.

Zahira Kamal (Appendix A) similarly emphasises the benefits that stem from the UN’s recognition of Palestine’s political status as a non-observer member state:

The UN bid internationalises the Palestinian rights and define[s] the borders of the Palestinian state. We can go to the UN and complain about the illegal Israeli settlements. We can {also} go to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the issues of settlements and Palestinian prisoners’.

By implication,

[The] next step {should be} to join the UN institutions and agreements. We have to follow up the UN recognition and not make the same mistake as {we did} with the UN partition plan [of] 1947. We have lost a great deal since 1947 and leaving things as they are will [ensure that we lose further ground]’.

In the highly optimistic framework proposed by Amr and Asfour, international pressure and lobbying will force Israel to comply with relevant UN resolutions. While Amr concedes that there are alternatives (to the two-state solution), he adds that ‘there might be other choices, and some are easy to take, but the consequences [will be] beyond the ability of Palestinians to endure’. Similarly, Sufian Abu Zaida (Appendix A) asserts that, while the two-state solution has been delayed due to Israeli practices, this does not in itself negate the two-state solution. He nonetheless recognises that both the continued relevance of the PNA and the desirability of the broader two-state solution remain a source of internal (within Fatah’s internal committees) and external (amongst the broader Palestinian public) tension.

In addition to each of these supporting arguments, the two-state solution is also frequently elevated as the embodiment of political realism/pragmatism. To this extent, the two-state solution’s continued appeal can be largely attributed to the fact that it is the only political proposal that will be acceptable to Israel (although this point is frequently understated and rationalised as ‘acceptable to the international community’). Nabil Amr (Appendix A) consequently makes the following observation:

The PLO established its relations and alliances with the international community on this basis. The Palestinian political parties of the PLO agree with this decision, although some of them have reservations. The one state solution that brings two cultures to live together is idealistic. Israel and the Israelis will not accept it.

In general, Palestinian support for the two-state solution is usually premised upon the assumption that Israel is predisposed to reject the one-state solution (due to a fear of being a minority within any putative Palestinian state). Ghassan Khatib (Appendix A), prominent Palestinian politician and vice-president of Birzeit University, implicitly acknowledges this when he states that: ‘Coexistence {will not be} easy or smooth because Israelis are privileged and racist. Israel will have the problem of demography and [it currently] has the power so [it] will never cooperate for a one-state solution’.

The Peace Process: Image and Reality

Internal division and external power imbalances notwithstanding, any putative peace process must contend with the ‘facts on the ground’ that have been established by successive Israeli administrations. As far back as 2004, Yasser Arafat, the then president of the PA, explicitly warned that the two-state solution was being imperiled by Israel’s determination to establish ‘facts on the ground’ (Milne 2004). As a logical extension of this continued commitment, Palestinians continue to endure a political reality that is characterised by restricted access between cities, towns and villages, the limitation of access to natural resources and a repeated refusal on the part of the Israeli authorities to allow independent economic development. In fragmenting Palestinian political contiguity and preventing stable economic development, the occupation regime has effectively negated the possibility of a viable, independent Palestinian state (Roy 2004).

Although the political consequences have long been obvious and beyond question, international observers have only recently begun openly to acknowledge the full implications of continued settlement expansion. The recent diplomatic and political furor that the proposed E1 settlement generated is a case in point: in sanctioning this hugely controversial settlement Netanyahu outlined proposals that would if implemented sever the West Bank and render the putative Palestinian state little more than a convenient fiction (see Peace Now 2012). The UN Secretary General openly stated that {the settlement plan} ‘would represent an almost fatal blow to the remaining chances of securing a two-state solution’ (Sherwood et al 2012).

In an abrupt deviation from the standard diplomatic niceties EU consuls went further to recommend that sanctions (against settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem) should be considered as a proportionate and appropriate response (Barak 2013). Netanyahu’s proposals added more weight to Khatib’s prediction that the Likud leader’s accession to power would mark the death knell for the peace process. In developing this proposition, Khatib (Appendix A) observed that: ‘the next four years will be the last for the two-state solution as more settlement and land confiscations will create isolated areas, cantons’. The recent formation of a new Israeli governing coalition (which assumed power on 14 March 2013), in which the former head of the settler council sits as the minister of housing and construction, makes this prospect all the more likely.

Political analysts and activists have frequently highlighted the fact that the creation of new ‘facts on the ground’ by the Israeli occupation regime) is jeopardising the two-state solution (Benvenisti 2003; Said 1999; Tilley 2005). Hanna Amireh (Appendix A), further reiterates that: ‘It is [a] one state reality now, but Israel controls and dominates. Israel wants to impose a Palestinian partial autonomy in isolated areas’. Proceeding to the logical implication of this process, he adds that: ‘Israel is creating facts on the ground that will lead to an apartheid reality’. Whichever definition is adopted (qualified autonomy or apartheid), it is clear that Netanyahu’s proposals are a clear threat to the sovereign status that was anticipated (at least by the Palestinian leadership) as the logical conclusion of the Oslo negotiation process (Newman and Falah 1997).

The self-evident failures of negotiation have ruptured the optimism that characterised the initial stages of the ‘peace’ process. In a telling appraisal of his own political legacy, Salam Fayyad (the former Palestinian prime minister) recently stated that as negotiation has not ended the Israeli occupation it, and by implication the entire peace process, can be said to have failed. Noting the full extent of settlement expansion, Fayyad stressed that the Oslo Accords, which in reality adhere more closely with Israeli demands than with international law, are no longer credible as a basis for continued negotiations.4 Aside from attempting to force Palestinians into voluntary exile by imposing intolerable obstacles and barriers, the Israeli occupation authorities are simultaneously addressing the demographic imbalance by expropriating Palestinian land and increasing the rate of settlement construction (Sussman 2004).

4 Interview with Salam Fayyad in Asharq al-Awsaat, 8 January 2013 [Arabic].

A document prepared to coincide with the March 2013 US presidential visit to Israel shows the full extent of the political challenge that confronts any putative two-state solution. Composed by the YESHA council, which represents the Israeli settlements’ municipal councils, it sets out a staged plan that will, if implemented, ultimately extend the Israeli state well beyond its internationally accepted parameters (Braunold 2013). In this context it is hard to escape the conclusion that the twostate solution is a convenient illusion that sustains fleeting, although politically expedient, illusions such as ‘self-determination’, ‘sovereignty’ and ‘national independence’. Hussein Agha and Robert Malley (2009) accordingly observe that the two-state solution has become ‘void of meaning, a catchphrase divorced from the contentious issues it is supposed to resolve’.

Even those officials who actively contributed to the peace process are arriving at the same conclusion. To take a particularly noteworthy example, Ahmad Queira, the former Palestinian prime minister, has bluntly stated that there is no prospect for peace and that the already remote prospect of a political settlement is rapidly receding; alarmingly, in the absence of ‘peace’, he observed that the only ‘alternative’ that will be left is for Palestinians to stand and defend their lands, just as they did in 1948.5 All this suggests that the question is not so much whether the peace process can succeed but rather for how much longer it can persist. For both sides, the two-state solution has come to be accepted as the lesser of two evils; for the Israelis, as a means by which to preserve and consolidate the Jewish state; for the Palestinians, as a belated concession to this non-negotiable condition. Needless to say, the proposition that a peace process should preserve racial purity and an ethnically pure state would surely raise eyebrows in any other context. The corollary that racially defined birth-rates should be conceived as a ‘threat’, a recurring concern within mainstream Israeli political discourse is, in most European countries, usually an affliction of the most extreme (far right) sections of the political spectrum.

In an unconscious affirmation of the obvious historical parallel, former Israeli PM Ehud Olmert (in a 2007 interview with Haaretz) explicitly invoked the grim prospect of a ‘South Africa-style struggle’ (Sussman 2004) if Israel failed to conclude a deal with the Palestinian political leadership. Zahira Kamal (Appendix A) further articulates these concerns:

The one state solution fulfills Palestinian aspirations and rights. However, {this} choice is not possible because Israel will never accept it. In the first place {there’s a strong} Israeli fear of being a minority. [D]emography is a major issue for Israel and its goal {to achieve} a Jewish state.

5 ‘Palestinians Ready to Push for One State’, Associated Press, 9 January 2004.

Uri Avnery, a veteran Israeli peace activist, similarly warned in 2003 that any peace initiative that takes a single state as its starting point would be stillborn, for the simple reason that the majority of Israelis retain a strong and abiding hatred for Arabs. Leila Khaled (Appendix A), a high-profile member of the Political Bureau of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, traces this exclusionary logic back to Israel’s establishment:

Israel was established on the basis of negating {the Palestinian} existence. The history of Zionist ideology tells us that Israel was established on the basis of liquefying the Palestinian identity and establishing a pure Jewish state on all historical Palestine. This was Ben-Gurion’s plan from the beginning. The Israelis are exercising a racial segregation.

In this context it would be appropriate to conceive of the two-state solution as a means by which to sanctify core racial or ethnic precepts that have long resonated within the heart of political Zionism. Furthermore, we can fully relate to Yiftachel’s (2005) insight that ‘Zionism remains a deeply ethnocratic movement {that is} premised {upon its} ‘historic right’ over the entire ‘promised homeland’ and {up} on the associated ‘othering’ of the Palestinians’.

New Dimensions

1. The Demise of the Two-State Solution?

Despite the fact that the two-state solution is still the official negotiating position of both the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority, there is a growing recognition that events and facts on the ground are gravitating towards the one-state template. As far back as 2004, Ahmad Queira had openly entertained the possibility of a one-state solution, although largely as an attempt to break the prevailing political deadlock (Ghanem 2010).

The notion that unilateral actions can assist the cause of peace, fundamentally opposed to the reciprocity that continues to be elevated–if more in theory than practice–as a foundational element of the formal peace process, has roots on both sides of the conflict. It therefore comes as little surprise to learn that Queira’s suggestion was itself a response to Ariel Sharon’s self-serving and disingenuous ‘disengagement’ initiative (that proposed limited withdrawal –from Gaza and sections of the West Bank).

In the absence of broader progress, it is conceivably more likely that settlement construction, an equally contentious unilateral project, will continue to frustrate the peace process. Ghassan Khatib (2004), consequently argued that:

Although the one-state ‘solution’ would not be considered officially by the Palestinians and was clearly at odds with Israel’s stated commitment to a Jewish state, it could nonetheless emerge as the unintended consequence of Israel’s policies in the West Bank which are delaying the establishment of a Palestinian state and making its prospects dimmer by the day’. (also see also Judt 2003)

It was in this context, as Khatib notes that Palestinians first began to debate the Palestinian Authority’s effectiveness and even the potential benefits that could stem from its dissolution. Intriguingly, a number of Palestinian political officials who played a central role in the development of the two-state framework have become increasingly vocal participants in these debates. In a particularly striking deviation from accepted orthodoxies, Saeb Erekat is on record as having stated that: ‘If the PA cannot achieve independence, it’s better that it didn’t exist at all’ (Ravid 2011).

In my interview with Erekat (Appendix A), he further clarified his thinking:

Israel is responsible for the two-state solution now. If Israel continues with building settlements things will develop into Apartheid reality. Israel is undermining the role of the Palestinian Authority as a patron and {this is} not sustainable. {The} PNA cannot continue like this.

Erekat (2011) is on record as having previously stated that ‘the Israeli settlements will destroy the opportunity for the two-state solution’. However, in later stages of our personal conversation, Erekat struck a less pessimistic note in recognising that existing settlements would have to be removed as part of the ‘price for peace’. Lustick (1993) has also previously discussed the possibility of removing existing settlements. As a logical progression from this position, he simultaneously reiterated that: ‘We are committed to the two-state solution which {has been} adopted by the international community [in accordance with] international law’.

Israeli advocates of the two-state solution have been equally alive to the implications that stem from the perpetuation of the political status quo (Alpher 2004). Tzipi Livni, the former Israeli foreign minister, has explicitly stated her concern that the two-state solution may no longer be an attainable political objective (Omer-Man 2013). Equally, Meron Benvenisti (2003), the former deputy mayor of Jerusalem, believes that ‘Israel and the Palestinians are sinking together into the mud of the ‘one state’. Incredibly (given the level of consensus that still surrounds the twostate solution) he contends that ‘the question is no longer whether {the state} will be binational, but which model to choose’.

It is particularly telling that Benvenisti’s pessimism is increasingly shared at the highest levels of the UN (the organisation that has provided the legal and political parameters and foundations of the two-state solution). As noted earlier, Ban Ki-moon, the current UN Secretary-General, has already noted that the two-state solution is close to collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions (see Sherwood et al, 2012). Lest onlookers fail to appreciate the significance of this statement, Ki-Moon reiterated that ‘2013 will be a decisive year for the two-state solution’.6 For a growing body of Palestinian public opinion, however, the imminent collapse of the two-state option is a reason for celebration, not for commiseration. Omar Barghouti, one of the founding members of the Campaign for Boycott and Divestment and Sanctions against Israel (BDS), therefore observes that: ‘The two-state solution, in my view, is not only unfeasible; it is far worse. It is immoral and illegal. In the best case scenario, the two-state solution would offer a minority of the Palestinian people, those living in the 1967-occupied territory, most of their rights’.7 Consequently, ‘If the Israeli occupation were to end tomorrow and Israel would dismantle its colonies and wall, this will not resolve the question of Palestine, as it would completely ignore the basic rights of 62% of the Palestinian people–the exile communities (mostly refugees) and the Palestinians holding Israeli citizenship–as well as undermine the right of return of Palestinian refugees in the 1967 occupied territory and inside the state of Israel’.

2. Resurrecting the One-State Approach

Popular disillusionment with the realities of the two-state solution has contributed, in recent years, to the re-engagement of previously foreclosed debates (Gilead and Shalom 2012). In offering an alternative to a political option that has, to date, offered little more than perpetual occupation, the one-state solution is increasingly perceived as an attractive alternative. Discussions along these lines traverse national divides, unite previously divided constituencies, and potentially surpass the two-state impasse. The notion of a one-state solution, even if somewhat nascent and undeveloped in form, has thus enjoyed a political rebirth (Karmi 2011; Peled 2006; Sussman 2004; Tilley 2005 and 2006; Yiftachel 2005; Hilal 2007).

In conceiving of a one-state approach, these discussions retrospectively justify Edward Said’s (1999) observation that ‘Oslo set the stage for separation, but real peace can come only with a bi-national Israeli-Palestinian state’. In asserting this point, Said anticipated many of the limitations that would

6 ‘2013 Will be a Decisive Year: UN Chief’, The Nation (Pakistan), 1 March 2013: http://www.nation.com.pk/pakistan-news-newspaper-daily-english-online/ international/01-Mar-2013/2013-will-be-a-decisive-year-un-chief.

7 The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics figures (for 2012) note that 38% of the total Palestinian population (11.6 million) live in the occupied territories, 50% live in exile and 12% live in the 1948 territory.

later be evidenced during the protracted collapse of the Oslo Accords. Engaged in retrospect, his analysis evidences an almost eerie prescience:

The only political vision worth holding on to is a secular bi-national one that transcends the ludicrous limitations of a little Palestinian state, declared for the second or third time, without much land or credibility, as well as the limitations that have been so essential to the Zionist form of apartheid imposed on us everywhere’. (Said 1998)

Said offered an equally harsh indictment of the Palestinian leadership’s political deficiencies:

Silly slogan[ising] conceals the real difficulties in actually establishing a state, difficulties that can only be overcome by real work, real thought, the real unity and, above all, real representation of all (as opposed to a part) of the Palestinian people’. (Said 1998)

Said’s analysis exposed the deficiencies and distortions of an official process that would enable successive Israeli governments to manipulate a distorted and grotesque ‘peace’ for their own ends (see Said 1995, 1998; 1999). In formally committing to peace negotiations, the Israeli politicomilitary elite sought the exact opposite: the consolidation of the benefits without the associated costs that accrued to the political status quo. Given the advantages that accrue to this scandalously unjust ‘settlement’, it is scarcely surprising to learn that ‘the vast majority of Israeli Jews would not agree to live in a binational Israeli state’ (Alpher 2008).

Conclusion

The political re-birth of the one-state solution itself testifies, although testimony is scarcely required to the fundamental failure of the two-state peace process. The weaknesses of the latter have been cruelly exposed in recent years, to the extent that it appears less a means for a just and sustainable settlement and more as the enshrinement of neo-colonial power relations. Interestingly, however, there appears to be little support for any course of action that would result in the dissolution of the PNA or the broader two-state solution. Even Hamas, whose opposition to peace or accommodation with Israel has long been an article of faith, has increasingly come to accept that the peace process could be compatible, under highly specific circumstances, with its own political objectives.

Extrapolating from my own interviews, it would therefore seem appropriate to speak in terms of a consensus that supports the reform or adaptation of the PNA and the associated assertion of a unified political position. At present, the main obstacle to both of these goals remains the continued division between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority; in both instances, the key question is whether there is a political will for such an alignment. As this article has sought to demonstrate, the continuation of this divide can be traced back to geo-political (Gaza/West Bank divide), international (externalisation) and internal (occupation) factors. As we have seen, more general Palestinian political positions cannot be fully discerned in isolation from any of these considerations, and due attention must correspondingly be given to the various ways in which the latter relates to the former.

As would be expected of an asymmetrical peace process, the Israeli question continues to loom large as the most volatile of the aforementioned fault lines; hence why the smallest adjustment by the Israeli government induces disproportionate shifts within the positions of its Palestinian ‘partner’. If the peace process is to continue to function as a subset of a uniquely volatile and unstable relationship then its long-term prospects do not look, to put it mildly, very promising. Even if we are willing to entertain the proposition that peace is still a political possibility, it is clear that illusion and self-deception both of which sustained the process during its formative years must be set aside. In any event, there is a very real possibility that ongoing developments may gain their own momentum and render human agency along with a priori assumptions obsolete. In recognising the intransigence of hardline Zionist positions on the settlement of the Palestine/Israeli question and the relative weakness of their own political leaders, Palestinian citizens are left to face a reality which is far removed from the utopian phraseology and imagery of the

‘peace’ process.

The nascent one-state reality incrementally assumes form while the Palestinian leadership still adheres to increasingly anachronistic understandings and approaches that derive from the two-state model; as presently constituted, elite actors manifestly lack an agency and strategy that is attuned to ongoing modifications within the broader political environment. To date, the notion of an alternative strategy only has any purchase at the level of the Palestinian elite because it provides a means by which the Palestinian political leadership can extract extremely limited concessions from its official peace partner. Needless to say, a ‘peace’ founded upon weakness, and its associated exploitation, is not a ‘peace’ that can, or which deserves, to last.

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Appendix A – Interviews

Amireh, Hanna, Interview by Nadia Naser, Telephone, 24 March 2013.

Amr, Nabil, Interview by Nadia Naser, Telephone, 10 January 2013.

Asfour, Hassan, Interview by Nadia Naser, Personal Interview (in Amman), 24 December 2012.

Bardawil, Salah, Interview by Nadia Naser, Telephone, 12 January 2013.

Barghouti, Omar, Interview by Nadia Naser, Email Communication, 08 January 2013.

Erekat, Saeb, Interview by Nadia Naser, Telephone, 17 April 2013.

Hamad, Ghazi, Interview by Nadia Naser, Telephone, 6 January 2013.

Kamal, Zihira, Interview by Nadia Naser, Telephone, 20 March 2013.

Khalid, Leila, Interview by Nadia Naser, Personal Interview (in Amman), 3 January 2013.

Khatib, Ghassan, Interview by Nadia Naser, Personal Interview (in Amman), 18 December 2012.

Zaida, Abu Sufian, Interview by Nadia Naser, Telephone, 12 March 2013.