

One Democratic State in Israel/Palestine as the Route to Durable Peace

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As the endless negotiations between the Israeli government and Palestinian Authority officials regurgitate old arguments while making no progress, a growing number of Israelis and Palestinians are paying attention to other solutions than the supposed “two state” outcome. They focus on the “one-democratic-state” solution -- a proposal to establish a single, democratic and secular state in the area known as Israel/Palestine.

The concept of coexistence in a binational or one secular democratic state, granting equal rights to all its citizens regardless of their religion, is worthy of critical consideration. It is not a new concept. In the early days of the Zionist movement, it was promoted by Albert Einstein, philosopher Martin Buber, and Rabbi Judah Leib Magnes who argued vociferously against a “Jewish state.” It was also a political position taken by the Palestine Liberation Organization in its more visible days, and by some Israeli parties in the 1950s. Though it did not garner significant support in past decades, the idea has received new interest with the collapse of the Oslo process, and recently it has been the subject of numerous books, research papers and conferences.

In the past eight years, over a dozen books were published analyzing carefully why a single democratic state is the only durable solution. These books rely on research data from various

disciplines, showing that the two people would benefit a great deal more if they shared the resources of the land together within a democratic framework. From every aspect, sociologically, economically, environmentally and security-wise, the Israelis and Palestinians are better off if they learn to live together in a secular country, with a constitution modeled after the American one, guaranteeing civil liberties and separation of state from religion.

Certainly, it will be no easy feat to educate both societies, after decades of wars, oppression, colonization, and violence against civilians, to respect the human and civil rights of each other. Perhaps the most pressing obstacle is the perception within Israeli society that a single, democratic state poses a threat to the Jews living in Israel/Palestine. This argument, reiterated ad nauseam by Israeli politicians, claims the single, democratic state is tantamount to the “elimination of Israel.” However, establishing a shared homeland for Israelis and Palestinians based on civil rights does not mean “the elimination of Israel” anymore than similar transformations in South Africa meant the elimination of South Africa.

Indeed, it will transform Israel, but this will be a positive transformation repairing truly destructive aspects of present-day Israel and producing a new and better country. Today’s Israel has failed to uphold the best of Jewish values and has in fact perverted them by making Judaism an adjunct of a discriminatory and brutal state ideology. If we want an Israel that is really true to the best of Jewish values, it cannot be exclusively Jewish. It is a strange but manifestly true irony that for Judaism and Israel to become really compatible, Israel must become a democratic, equalitarian, and tolerant place.

Most commentators think that the removal of the 450,000 Israeli settlers currently living in the area of the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) slated for a tiny Palestinian state is not feasible. But even if this issue is resolved, there are other, far more

daunting, obstacles to the mythological “two-state” solution. The establishment of Israel as a “Jewish state” in 1948 created the largest remaining refugee population in the world. As Israeli historians have documented, Israel was founded through the ethnic cleansing of more than 500 Palestinian villages and towns, which brought about the Palestinian refugee problem -- a continuing crisis for 6 million refugees who have been driven from their homeland. Under international law, they have a right to return to their homeland, which must be implemented without jeopardizing the rights of Israelis to live peacefully and securely in their homes.

Israeli and Palestinian researchers have shown that only a single, democratic state, guaranteeing civil liberties to all its citizens and providing economic opportunity to its communities, can accommodate a just solution to the otherwise intractable refugee problem. A democratic, secular state defused of national-religious components will provide the sustainable framework needed for integrating the returning Palestinian refugees while at the same time allowing Israel to continue to thrive economically and technologically. Undoubtedly, it is also the best guarantee of security and peace for both societies.

Rather than engage in convening futile peace conferences that ignore human rights obligations and International law, politicians and policy makers would do well to get us all (Israelis and Palestinians) to sit down and start drafting a constitution that provides for joint security and economic development, and guarantees civil liberties to all. That is the real road map to a durable and just peace.

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