
The Death and Life of the Two-State Solution

How the Palestinians May Eventually Get Their State

Grant Rumley and Amir Tibon

On March 17, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu won reelection, thanks in part to a desperate last-minute pledge to his right-wing base that the Palestinians would never get a state so long as he was in power. After the election, he tried to walk his comments back, but Palestinian observers weren't buying it. As one person close to the Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas put it, Netanyahu's reelection marked the end of an era, "the final closing of the window of opportunity for a negotiated solution." The insider continued: "Two years ago, [U.S. Secretary of State] John Kerry told the U.S. Congress that in a matter of a year and a half, or two years at most, the window will close. He was right. It's over."

Compounding the Palestinians' frustration was the recognition that the outcome of the election didn't even matter much: even if Netanyahu had been dethroned, the Palestinians would still have had to rely on what they consider an indifferent and ineffective Obama administration to push the stalled Middle East peace negotiations forward. No one in Ramallah, the de facto Palestinian capital, admits it publicly, but some Palestinian officials actually miss the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush, which seemed to have more influence on Israel than the current White House does. Saeb Erekat, the Palestinians' emissary for talks with Israel and the United States, likes to note in

GRANT RUMLEY is a Research Analyst at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. Follow him on Twitter @GrantRumley.

AMIR TIBON is Diplomatic Correspondent for *Walla!*, an Israeli news website. Follow him on Twitter @amirtibon.

private conversations that Bush was the first U.S. president to support a Palestinian state and the only president under whom Israel removed settlements from land claimed by the Palestinians. Barack Obama's administration may have gotten into repeated fights with Netanyahu, but for all the hoopla, Obama has done little to create progress on the ground toward a Palestinian state.

None of this has been good for Abbas, the 80-year-old president of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the chair of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Today, Abbas is the weakest he has been in years. The man whom former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres once described as "the best partner that Israel ever had" now finds himself ten years into what was meant to be a four-year presidential term without any real achievement or legacy. His supporters point out that during his tenure, the UN General Assembly recognized Palestine as a state, but that recognition means nothing for the average Palestinian in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, or a refugee camp in a neighboring Arab country. Israeli settlements have expanded on his watch, the Islamist militant group Hamas still controls Gaza, and a two-state solution in which an Israeli state and a Palestinian state divide the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea looks more remote than ever. The toll on Abbas is evident. "The man simply looks sad," an Israeli journalist who has covered him for years said. "It's almost heartbreaking to talk to him these days."

Ironically, however, it is precisely the death of the two-state solution that may turn out to be its revival. Israeli leaders seem to be betting that the status quo of military control in the West Bank can persist indefinitely, but they are likely to be proved mistaken. Younger Palestinians who have lost faith in a negotiated two-state settlement to the conflict are likely to start pushing for their rights inside a single, binational state instead. And as these demands for civil liberties and voting rights escalate and gain international backing, many Israeli leaders may come to realize that however scared they are of a two-state solution, a one-state solution could be even worse. And so they could well end up moving to set up a separate Palestinian state after all.

SEEKING A STATE

Since Abbas took office in 2005, Palestinians have sought to achieve statehood by acquiring all the international legal trappings of a state. But it was not until 2011 that the "Palestine 194" campaign, which

envisioned Palestine becoming the 194th country recognized by the UN, began in earnest. That year, Abbas threatened to call a vote at the UN Security Council over Palestinian statehood, arguing that Palestine's admission to the UN would bolster the Palestinians' leverage in future negotiations. Ultimately, Abbas abandoned the vote, mainly due to the threat of a U.S. veto. In 2012, however, he returned to the General Assembly, where the Palestinians won a vote upgrading their status from "non-state observer" to "non-member observer state," putting Palestine on par with the Vatican.

With momentum on their side, in early 2013, Palestinian leaders began mentioning other international organizations and conventions

Many younger Palestinians are abandoning the goal of a Palestinian state.

they wished to join, and Abbas put their number at 63. The plan, officials said, was to apply to these institutions in escalating order of importance, so as to increase their leverage over Israel. The International Criminal Court (ICC) was

to be among the last. So emboldened were the Palestinians that by mid-2013, Kerry insisted that they halt their campaign before he would broker a new round of negotiations. Abbas obliged, but the campaign was never far from his mind. When the talks collapsed on April 1, 2014, Abbas went back to his previous strategy, immediately signing paperwork to join 15 international conventions (most of them minor).

Abbas made a calculated decision to leave the ICC off the list, trying to avoid a full-scale diplomatic confrontation with Israel and keep the door open for renewed talks. But it is difficult to walk such a fine line, and events can take on a life of their own. When war with Israel erupted in the Gaza Strip last summer, Palestinian unilateralism moved forward accordingly, and the ICC—which the Palestinians hoped could be used to prosecute Israelis for war crimes—shot to the top of the agenda. Abbas was not fully comfortable with such a move, but he felt that his domestic political situation left him with little choice. In December he tried once more to get the Security Council to confer statehood on Palestine, but when that attempt failed, he signed the treaty that established the ICC, as well as letters of intent for more than a dozen other organizations, thrusting the conflict into a new, legal era.

But the Palestine 194 campaign doesn't have a very long shelf life. The Palestinians became full members of the ICC on April 1, but any charges they file there will likely take years before coming to trial, if they



Finding a way: Israel's separation barrier in the West Bank, February 2009

ever do. Returning to the UN Security Council is always an option, meanwhile, but Jordan—a natural, if indifferent, sponsor of pro-Palestinian resolutions—is scheduled to lose its nonpermanent seat at the end of the year. And even if the Obama administration decided to abstain from voting on, rather than veto, a resolution calling for the establishment of a Palestinian state based on Israel's 1967 borders, the consequences would be limited: a diplomatic headache for Israel and a symbolic achievement for the PA, but no real progress toward a settlement. When the UN General Assembly voted to recognize Palestine in 2012, Dani Dayan, a prominent Israeli advocate for settlements in the West Bank, tweeted in Hebrew, “The view outside my window in Samaria tonight remains the same: Israel.” Israel's professional diplomats had worked overtime to explain why the Palestinian statehood campaign was outrageous; Dayan pointed out that it was actually meaningless.

So what comes after the Palestinians have exhausted their attempt to force a Palestinian state on Israel through the international arena? With armed struggle, negotiations, and international pressure all having failed, the PA will have to admit that the time has come to try something new. Abbas has threatened many times in the past to dismantle the PA, which would effectively put all responsibility for governance in the West Bank on Israel, but Israel has never taken these threats too seriously. However, his youngest son, the businessman Tareq

Abbas, said last year that the Palestinians should give up on the two-state solution and demand instead civil rights from Israel. This veiled reference to voting rights would give Palestinians access to the Israeli Knesset, where decisions regarding their lives are really made. A combination of the father's threats and the son's alternative strategy would put Israel on a dangerous path: the country would have to deal with approximately 4.5 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza asking not for land of their own but for a voice and a role inside Israel itself.

YOUTH IN REVOLT

Any such change in strategy would require a changing of the guard in the Palestinian national movement. A new strategy won't happen so long as Mahmoud Abbas is leading the Palestinians, and it is hard to imagine anyone but Abbas leading the Palestinians while he is still on the scene. Abbas has cracked down on dissidents and regularly arrests journalists, but he manages to keep the situation quiet, and there are few things Israeli, Arab, or U.S. officials want more than a quiet West Bank—especially given the turmoil raging elsewhere in the region these days.

But it's a different story internally. These days, Abbas' biggest concern is not fighting Israel or Hamas but fighting his nemesis within Fatah, the leading Palestinian party: Muhammad Dahlan. The feud dates back to the 2007 civil war between Fatah and Hamas, when Abbas watched Dahlan, then a rising leader in Fatah and the security chief in the Gaza Strip, lose the territory to Hamas. Dahlan returned to the West Bank afterward a marked man in the eyes of Abbas, who exiled him in 2011. From his base in the United Arab Emirates, Dahlan now spends his time plotting revenge.

Dahlan represents everything Abbas is not: he is popular, charismatic, relatively young, and unafraid to shed blood. Although he spent time with the PLO's exiled leadership in Tunisia in the 1990s, Dahlan is not exactly in the so-called Tunis crowd, the group of elder statesmen who helped form modern Palestinian politics. The Tunis crowd shifted the Palestinian movement away from armed struggle and toward bilateral negotiations with Israel, and it built the PA. But these leaders haven't made much progress in recent years and are commonly regarded among younger Palestinians as corrupt and stagnant. Few want Abbas' successor to be another member of the old guard, and Abbas sees Dahlan's looming challenge as the start of a major struggle for control over the future of the Palestinian movement.

The divide breaks down along generational lines. Younger Palestinians are losing patience with the Tunis crowd and its creation, the PA. As a result, many of them are undergoing a political evolution—abandoning, like Abbas' own son, the goal of an independent Palestinian state in favor of attaining citizenship and rights in a binational Israeli state. A 2013 poll by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research found that 65 percent of Palestinians over the age of 50 still preferred the two-state solution, compared with only 48 percent of those between the ages of 18 and 28.

The impulse among that younger demographic is realistic. At a recent meeting of about a dozen young Israeli and Palestinian journalists convened by a pro-peace organization, participants were asked whether they supported the two-state solution. All the Israelis were for it, although some, reflecting the fears of many Israeli Jews, thought it was too dangerous to pursue at the moment. On the Palestinian side, only one participant supported the two-state solution. The rest, a group of young, moderate, worldly Palestinians, said they would prefer to get Israeli citizenship. “You guys can just get into your car, drive to the airport, and catch a flight to Paris,” one of the Palestinians told the Israelis. “I have to file a request months ahead, go through checkpoints, and get special permissions from Israeli intelligence agencies. Israel will never give us a state, but it can give us our rights. I want to be like you.”

For young Palestinians who have grown up under the PA, the demise of that corrupt and authoritarian pseudo-state and the incorporation of the West Bank into Israeli institutions would be no great loss. Khalil Shikaki, a 60-year-old Palestinian pollster, explained the differing views to *The New York Times* in 2014:

Just ask my son. He will tell you that my generation has failed and should exit the stage and take its mainstream paradigm, the two-state solution, along with it.

The views of my generation were formed during the heyday of the Palestinian national movement; his views were formed during the failed years of Oslo [the peace process that began in 1993], the days of perceived Palestinian Authority corruption and tyranny, the Internet and social media. We are pragmatic; he is idealistic. We demand independence and sovereignty; he demands equal rights.

Not since the years following the 1948 Arab-Israeli war has Palestinian politics seen such a stark generational divide. Back then, young

Palestinian activists such as Yasir Arafat and George Habash established their own liberation movements and parties, stealing the mantle of leadership from their defeated elders. Today, a new wave of leaders will likely spark a conflict between the liberation movement (the PLO) and the state-building apparatus (the PA), one the latter will probably lose.

Disbanding the PA would send Palestinian politics back to pre-Oslo times, when officials adopted a liberation-movement mindset rather than a state-in-waiting one. Power would rest with whoever controlled the largest political party, Fatah. But Fatah would be itself weakened, since it is so closely tied to the PA, to which it has provided leadership from the beginning. To admit that the PA was a failed experiment would be to admit that the single biggest investment of the premier Palestinian political party was a failure.

Hamas emerged as the antiestablishment political party in the throes of the first intifada, the Palestinian uprising that began in 1987. When the Oslo process led to the creation of a Palestinian government in waiting, Hamas vehemently opposed it. By 2006, Hamas had decided to accept governance enough to contest elections and win control over the Gaza Strip. But Fatah had no intention of letting Gaza go to its rival, and the result was the 2007 civil war. Were the PA to collapse, Hamas officials would line up around the corner to cheer good riddance to a cash cow they never controlled.

A return to the pre-Oslo phase of Palestinian nationalism could also turn the PLO back into a weak government dependent on its neighbors and sponsors, just as it was for most of its existence. Some of the Palestinians' possible regional sponsors, such as Egypt, Jordan, and some of the Gulf states, would find it hard to give up on the PA and the two-state solution—not least because they have served as a fig leaf for their normalization of relations with Israel over the last few decades. For other, more rejectionist states, such as Qatar and Turkey, the abandonment of the two-state solution in favor of an equal rights campaign might allow them to shift their support from Hamas—their current darling—to the PLO.

THE ONE-STATE SOLUTION

A PLO that no longer had to run the PA, enjoyed the support of younger Palestinian nationalists, and received newfound assistance from regional sponsors would not just change the dynamic on the ground in the occupied territories; it would also generate real international pressure

on Israel. To date, foreign threats have failed to alter Israel's calculus. Even though some on the Israeli left have hoped that the specter of European sanctions over settlement building would convince the government to renew the two-state solution, that now seems unlikely. Europe's steps on this front have been relatively minimal, targeting the settlements while sparing Israel's economy within the 1967 lines.

In the 2015 election, the Israeli left tried to convince voters that Israel faced a grave threat in the international arena, from economic sanctions to formal condemnations to official recognitions of a Palestinian state.

But voters didn't buy it, because their fear of territorial concessions in the West Bank overcame their fear of any new anti-settlement measures drafted in Brussels. In the absence of progress toward a two-state solution, however, the international debate over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could start sliding

toward a one-state reality, and the world will likely begin demanding that Israel give Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem equal rights. At that point, Israelis would find the international threat more frightening than the cost of a Palestinian state.

This slide would take time, especially given the current cast of characters in the international arena. Obama, now mulling a last-ditch effort to save the two-state solution, may allow Kerry one more try, even though the last round of peace talks was launched under the same pretense. But with such bad chemistry between Abbas and Netanyahu, two leaders who seem to share only a desire to stay in power and a severe disappointment in the Obama administration, new talks are unlikely to achieve anything. A new round may collapse even faster than the last one did.

A shift toward a one-state outcome would create a tough dilemma for Israel, since officials would not be able to argue against it by appealing to security. During his six years in office, Netanyahu has rejected moves toward a Palestinian state by arguing that any land that Israeli forces evacuated and handed over to the PA would immediately be taken over by Hamas, the self-proclaimed Islamic State, or Hezbollah. Abbas has spent his entire time in office trying (and failing) to convince the Israelis that his security forces could quell the more violent elements in the West Bank and Gaza. But since the 2007 civil war, his rhetoric

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has not been able to overcome Fatah's humiliating defeat at the hands of Hamas and the subsequent expulsion of the entire Fatah leadership from Gaza. So Netanyahu has had an easy time suggesting that a Palestinian state might be a threat to Israel. Yet it would be far harder for him or any future Israeli prime minister to say no to a new generation of Palestinians who called for Israeli citizenship and voting rights but no change to the existing security structure.

The most obvious Israeli counterstrategy to such a one-state campaign would be a move to put the Palestinians on the path to statehood. Since the Palestinians would be getting a state, an Israeli prime minister could argue, there would be no need to grant them voting rights. But the current Israeli leadership is refusing to lay the groundwork for such a state, sometimes invoking reasonable arguments (such as concerns about security and the lack of a viable Palestinian governance system) and at other times sticking to religious arguments about Israel's right to the land. At some point, the international community will question whether Israeli military control of the West Bank really is a temporary, soon-to-be-resolved situation and, if it isn't, what should be done about the two million people living under it.

Granting Israeli voting rights to the Palestinians living under Israeli control in the West Bank and East Jerusalem would mean the end of the Jewish state, and there is no chance the Israelis would agree to it. A one-state campaign could, however, inflict massive damage on Israel, far greater than what anti-Israeli or pro-Palestinian campaigns have. Kerry gave Israel a taste of the umbrage it might face openly when he warned in private last year that without a peace deal, Israel could become "an apartheid state." Although his words angered officials in Jerusalem and members of the organized Jewish community in the United States, Netanyahu's closest confidant, former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, regularly sounds a similar warning.

A PARADOXICAL PATH TO PEACE

All of this suggests that the most likely result of an impending one-state outcome is the implementation of the two-state solution. That would be the obvious way for Israel to silence its critics and kill any demands for Palestinian civil rights. An Israeli stance that refused to grant citizenship or voting rights to the Palestinians but held out the prospect of granting them clear title to most of the West Bank would meet with much acclaim.

For the Palestinians, in other words, the increasingly likeliest way to achieve an independent state is, paradoxically, to give up on trying to get one. Only when the Palestinians make the Israelis recognize that the status quo cannot persist indefinitely and reach for something the Israelis hold even more dear than the West Bank—control over Israel itself as a Jewish state—will the Israelis begin to see a two-state solution as their least-bad option. But if things eventually reach this crossroads, the state the Palestinians will be granted won't be the one they have demanded for the last two decades. Instead of following the 1967 borders, its outline will be based on Israel's security and demographic concerns. In the last round of peace talks, Netanyahu was willing to discuss a Palestinian state in approximately 90 percent of the West Bank, with limited land swaps. If Israel decides one day to support a Palestinian state in order to kill a binational state, the result is more likely to be Netanyahu's abridged version of it.

The United States has few options to counter this one-state slide, but one is to revert to the formula Bush used in 2004. That year, in exchange for an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, he sent Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon a letter reassuring Israel of his support for its position in future negotiations with the Palestinians. In the letter, Bush made a distinction between Israeli settlements deep in the West Bank, which are generally expected to be evacuated in a future agreement, and the larger settlements closer to the 1967 borders, which are generally expected to become part of a future Israel. In effect, Bush was decoupling the 1967 borders from the peace process. One of Obama's first steps on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was to back away from Bush's letter and emphasize the importance of the 1967 borders. The next U.S. president might find this forgotten legacy of Bush and Sharon more useful for making progress in an era of Israeli and Palestinian unilateralism.

In such a situation, moreover, this outcome could credibly be presented to Israeli voters not as a soft act of justice or charity (arguments that do not resonate) but as a hard act of self-preservation. Dov Weisglass, who was Sharon's chief of staff during the Gaza disengagement negotiations, has said that Sharon presented the pullout to Israeli voters in "fluent Likudish." Sharon did not conjure up fantasies of everlasting peace; he framed the decision as necessary for Israel's survival. A pullout from the West Bank will need to be explained in similar terms. Only then will the threats that come with it stop trumping the supposed opportunities of some distant peace accord. 🌐

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