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The only convincing solution

Why it's illusory to think the two-state solution of the Israel-Palestine conflict can't be saved

Read this article in German.

If the two-state solution of the Israel-Palestine conflict could speak, it might exclaim with resignation in its voice and Mark Twain in mind: 'The reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated'. Why the resignation? Well, because the news of the two-state solution's death seem to correspond to the actual political situation as well the widespread sentiment it creates. More than 25 years after the Oslo Accords, the two-state solution is considered an 'illusion'. It's precisely *that*, however, that is the illusion, because on practical and normative grounds, there is no other convincing solution.

The disappointment with the current political situation is entirely understandable. A lasting peace between two independent states living and flourishing side by side is further away than ever. In both countries – a majority of UN member states now recognise Palestine statehood – most people view the two-state solution as politically discredited. There was no peace dividend. Palestinians still struggle to survive an occupation that is illegitimate under international law and unacceptable under human rights law, while Israelis continue to be the target of terrorist attacks and violence. Furthermore, the Trump Administration is doing its best to undermine the two-state solution in both words and deeds. Yet the actual political damage was done earlier.

The Oslo II Accord provided for 1999 as the end of a five-year interim period in which the negotiating parties could build the trust needed to conclude a final peace treaty. But nothing ever came of it: compromise was unacceptable to Israel's national-religious camp, who attacked the agreement with 'blood and fire' in demonstrations against then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. He was eventually murdered by a national-religious Israeli. At the same time, important Palestinian voices, not just Hamas members, still called for 'armed struggle' against 'the Zionists'. The real tragedy is that both sides publicly blame each other for the failure of the Oslo Accords.

Greater Israel or Greater Palestine?

Paradoxically, the two-state-solution is written off as illusory by very different political camps in Israel and Palestine – and internationally – for ideological reasons. In national-religious circles, the two-state solution is either portrayed as a misguided vision of liberal, unrealistic do-gooders (Israel), or as a Western/Zionist conspiracy (Palestine). Israel's new nation-state law describes Jewish settlements in the West Bank as the state's goal, while Palestinian politicians and activists believe they have to liberate both Jenin in the West Bank and Haifa in Israel.

People who talk like this just want *one* state between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. The only question is whether it should be a Greater Israel or a Greater Palestine. In any case, for the past two years, Israelis have had serious support from the Trump Administration and other right-wing populist from Budapest to Manila, who are especially seeking to further undermine the Palestinian right to national self-determination.

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The grand nationalist dreams being nourished this way are shocking and dangerous. The conflict's power asymmetries particularly benefit Israel's national-religious camp. The creeping annexation of 'Judea and Samaria' – the term increasingly used by the Israeli mainstream to designate Palestinian territory in the West Bank – is becoming more and more flagrant.

The nation-state law is merely the latest indication that Israel's one-state solution would create a *Jewish* state rather than a democratic state with equal rights for all its citizens. However, similar processes exist in Palestine, too, including the presumed need to 'fight against Israel' and the explicit or tacit denial that a Jewish nation-state has any place in the Middle East.

These discourses threaten not just peace but also the future of both Israel and Palestine. Approximately 14 million people live between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River. About half are Jewish Israelis and half Palestinians with Israeli citizenship (some 20 per cent of Israel's population) or residents of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Wanting to find a political situation that acknowledges and preserves the rights and identity of both sides is politically entirely reasonable. The real illusion is the belief that either a Greater Israel or a Greater Palestine is a

viable option. What would happen to the 50 per cent who would be left out?

We need a two-state solution

At first glance, it may appear that the *inclusive* one-state solution that is so popular among progressives is the right response to *exclusive* claims. But for all the justifiable criticism of exclusionary nationalism, the proponents of one state of Israel/Palestine that would be secular and democratic for all its Christian, Jewish, Muslim and other citizens have not been able to show how it would differ from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Lebanon. These two are fairly positive examples of post-conflict states that have emerged from major ethno-national conflicts. In its legitimate search for supra- and transnational identity and multilateral political structures in the Middle East, the progressive camp should not overlook the nation state and national identities. It should instead acknowledge their synergies.

This should be a lesson from Oslo, which propagated the idea of the two states of Israel and Palestine but ignored three essential elements. Firstly, the need to integrate the peace process into a framework for regional security. The peace in Northern Ireland (which is, of course, threatened by Brexit) is not 'just' underpinned by an agreement between Republicans and Unionists, but is also maintained by Northern Ireland's integration into the EU's supranational structures. Secondly, the need to embed the two-state solution internationally, including in terms of security policy: Like other ethno-national conflicts, Israel and Palestine need the involvement of third parties. Thirdly, there must be much more intense discussions within both Israel and Palestine regarding nationalist narratives. Glossing over the heftiest points of contention during the peace process has brought us here.

These issues concern not just politicians, but also the media, religious leaders and, in particular, the educational system. The sad fact that Oslo's two-state solution hardly addressed them shows how difficult it is to find lasting solutions to ethno-nationalist conflicts: in Israel and Palestine – as well as in Nagorno-Karabakh, Cyprus, Western Sahara, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and yes, Northern Ireland. Yet apparently insurmountable obstacles *can* be overcome – including those pertaining to the two-state solution. It would be good for both Israelis and Palestinians.



Stephan Stetter
Munich

Stephan Stetter is Professor for International Politics and Conflict Research at the University of the Federal Armed Forces in Munich and co-editor of *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen*. He researches and publishes internationally on historical-sociological theories of international politics, on Middle East topics as well as on EU foreign policy.

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