



Neither Two States nor One: The Palestine Question in the Age of Trump

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In the opening weeks of his administration, President Donald Trump overturned a longstanding U.S. commitment to territorial partition and a two-state model for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu seized the opportunity to demand “overriding security control over the entire area west of the Jordan River” while exploring regional approaches that bypass the Palestinians. At the same time, a host of Israeli politicians are reviving older models such as limited autonomy without political sovereignty and partial territorial annexation, or advocating for other forms of separation with Israel’s continued control. The resulting middle ground—neither two states nor one—poses a great risk to Palestinian self-determination. By situating recent developments in a broader historical context going back to the autonomy plan of Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin, this essay provides an overview of a shifting political discourse and examines the consequences for the fate of the Palestinians today.

Netanyahu’s Art of the Deal

IN ONE OF THE MOST revealing moments during the joint White House press conference between President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on 15 February 2017, a reporter asked the U.S. president if he was “ready to give up the notion of [the] two-state solution.” Would he be willing “to hear different ideas” from Israel’s premier, such as “annex[ing] . . . parts of the West Bank and unrestricted settlement construction?” Dispensing with decades of official U.S. policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Trump responded like a carnival barker presiding over the stately East Room. “So I’m looking at two-state and one-state, and I like the one that both parties like,” he said to an outburst of laughter. “I’m very happy with the one that both parties like. I can live with either one. I thought for a while the two-state looked like it may be the easier of the two. But honestly, if Bibi and if the Palestinians—if Israel and the Palestinians are happy—I’m happy with the one they like the best.”¹

Notwithstanding the bonhomie of such an exchange, decades of experience should not fool anyone into believing that Trump’s comments would lead to a just outcome along equitable lines.

Historians will no doubt look back on this press conference as an important juncture in the wider trajectory of the U.S.-led peace process. Alongside the president's veritable "wink wink" to Netanyahu to "hold back on settlements for a little bit," talk of a "great peace deal" was clarifying.² Dropping all pretense of diplomatic protocol, Trump upended a longstanding U.S. commitment to territorial partition as the basis for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By flatly renouncing the assumed model of an Israeli state and a Palestinian state existing side by side, he left open the possibility of alternative forms of sovereignty, or perhaps no sovereignty at all, for the Palestinians. It now remains unclear what possible options might be available to the Palestinians, and how—if at all—they might achieve their self-determination in this uncharted political environment.³

Despite the attention given to Trump's rhetoric, Netanyahu's follow-up response was actually the more significant revelation of the press conference. Asked whether he had come to Washington to tell the president that he was "backing off the two-state solution," the Israeli prime minister insisted that rather than "deal[ing] with labels, I want to deal with substance." He then offered two prerequisites for peace. The first, "Palestinian recognition of Israel as a Jewish state," was a familiar and highly contested demand that Netanyahu first explicitly raised in his 2009 speech at Bar-Ilan University. But the second prerequisite was less well-known. "In any peace agreement," Netanyahu continued, "Israel must retain the overriding security control over the entire area west of the Jordan River. Because if we don't, we know what will happen—because otherwise we'll get another radical Islamic terrorist state in the Palestinian areas exploding the peace, exploding the Middle East."

Put simply, the Israeli prime minister leveraged expansive security demands as a means to render Israel's permanent sovereign control of the entirety of the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea a prerequisite for peace.⁴ It was an astonishing demand, based on a familiar theme, but linked to a new vision for dealing with the Palestinians. Netanyahu's remarks were a clear rewording of his 2009 request for U.S. support to prevent the emergence of a Palestinian army and maintain Israeli control over Palestinian airspace. In his speech at the annual Bar-Ilan conference that year, he insisted that "the Palestinian area must be demilitarized,"⁵ and reported telling President Barack Obama just two months earlier, "If we get a guarantee of demilitarization, and if the Palestinians recognize Israel as the Jewish state, we are ready to agree to a real peace agreement, a demilitarized Palestinian state side by side with the Jewish state."⁶ The prime minister's earlier request did not sway Washington but his latest introduction of the more expansive Israeli demand for security control *over the entire area west of the Jordan River* will no doubt fall on favorable ears inside the Trump administration. When linked with the prime minister's promise that "I won't evacuate settlements," delivered at the 2014 World Economic Forum in Davos, one wonders what might be left for Palestinians after calculating all the requisite subtractions.⁷

Netanyahu was well equipped in meeting the best-selling author of *Trump: The Art of the Deal*.⁸ His Washington visit even elicited praise from the most threatening members of his coalition, who celebrated the invocation of these latest demands. On his very active Facebook account, the leader of Habayit Hayehudi (the Jewish Home Party) and Minister of Education Naftali Bennett posted the following message in Hebrew shortly after the press conference concluded: "A new era. After twenty-four years, the Palestinian flag was removed from the mast today and replaced with the Israeli flag. It strengthens the prime minister, who revealed leadership and courage and fortified

the security of Israel.”⁹ Bennett is a direct competitor of Netanyahu’s and believes the prime minister has not gone far enough in marginalizing Palestinian aspirations for statehood. “We’re in a government that I insisted not have [the establishment of] a Palestinian state in its guidelines,” Bennett has said. “If we are talking about a return to the 1967 lines and the division of Jerusalem, I won’t just resign from the government, I’ll topple it. We shouldn’t give up an inch of land, we shouldn’t give any land to the Palestinians,” he added emphatically, in an interview with Israel’s Channel 2 television station in 2016.¹⁰ His praise of Netanyahu’s visit was therefore noteworthy, signaling the triumphant revival of non-statist models for resolving the Palestinian question.

Reviving Autonomy

What might such a model look like? In the Channel 2 interview, Bennett spoke openly of “Palestinian autonomy on steroids,” a version of his “stability plan” whereby West Bank Palestinians living in Area A (under full control of the Palestinian Authority or PA) and Area B (under joint control between the PA and Israel) would govern themselves without external interference but without true independence. Area C (and the Israeli settlements that fill it) would be annexed to Israel, and Palestinians who lived there would be granted Israeli citizenship.¹¹ Variations on this model of limited autonomy and annexation are very much in vogue among the Israeli Right today, and they are presented as an innovative and just solution to the Palestinian question. The ideas are premised on the elision of sovereign Palestinian political control over contiguous territory, and date back to concepts originally introduced by Israel’s first Likud prime minister, Menachem Begin.

In December of 1977, from the floor of the Israeli Knesset, Begin had announced an autonomy plan for the “Arab residents of Judea and Samaria” (Begin’s preferred terminology for the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and its Palestinian inhabitants). This plan was a nonterritorial form of autonomy for the territories’ Palestinian population that would be facilitated by administrative councils overseeing local matters such as education, housing, transport, agriculture, and health. Sovereign control of the territory, however, was not to be given up, with security and public order remaining in the hands of the Israeli authorities. “We have a right and a demand for sovereignty over these areas of Eretz Yisrael,” Begin told the Knesset. “This is our land and it belongs to the Jewish nation rightfully.”¹²

For Begin, autonomy was a benevolent means to deal with the Palestinian inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and curtail Palestinian aspirations for self-determination. He believed he had found a solution for the challenges that emerged after Israel’s conquest in 1967, one that could both bypass direct annexation of the territories *and* uphold liberal claims to protecting a national minority. The genesis of this idea was marked by Begin’s offer of full Israeli citizenship to “Arab residents of Judea and Samaria” in June 1975, reiterated in a speech to the French parliament in December 1976. But while citizenship for “Arab residents” was presented alongside the emerging option of cultural autonomy, in practice, the 1978 Camp David negotiations ensured that full territorial sovereignty was retained by Israel.¹³

Begin’s plan was an attempt to assert Israeli sovereign control (*de facto* or *de jure*) over the territory across the Green Line, while extending limited political rights to its indigenous population. Simultaneously, his government worked to expand the size and number of Jewish

settlements, leading to the massive expansion of Israel's "matrix of control" in the West Bank and Gaza over the course of the 1980s.¹⁴ Begin's autonomy plan was initially presented to the administration of Jimmy Carter, and later to Ronald Reagan's White House. It was the subject of extensive (and little-known) negotiations between Egypt and Israel after Camp David, lasting from 1979 to 1982. Ultimately, what was known as the autonomy talks failed with the onset of the 1982 Lebanon War as Israel's political targeting of Palestinian nationalism gave way to a military focus on the Palestine Liberation Organization presence in Beirut.

Yet autonomy's imprint on the peace process has remained strong, most notably instantiated by the 1993 Oslo Accords.¹⁵ Although ostensibly designed as an interim arrangement, the Oslo framework provided limited self-rule (by the PA) and local control over domestic matters. Twenty-four years after Oslo, Bennett and his contemporaries are speaking the same language as Begin. They offer Palestinians limited control over their internal affairs, from oversight of West Bank sewage systems to education, agriculture, health, and labor. Likud member of the Knesset (MK) Yoav Kisch recently suggested introducing an updated version of Begin's original autonomy plan,¹⁶ which would dissolve the PA and impose Israeli sovereignty over all settlements in the Jordan Valley. Rather than citizenship, Kisch's approach would grant Palestinians "an autonomous administrative region without full sovereignty"¹⁷ under Israeli administration, preventing them from voting in a sovereign parliament and enshrining their unequal status. "I will never allow Arabs living in Judea and Samaria the right to vote in the Knesset since this would undermine the Jewish character of the state," Kisch explained in an interview with the *Jerusalem Post*. "But we can also not allow a Palestinian state because of the security risk," he added.¹⁸ One need not try very hard to imagine the specter of South African-style Bantustans rising in the hilly West Bank landscape.

Despite Kisch's claims that Israel would not incur sanctions as a result, his approach is a clear attempt to enshrine functional apartheid in the literal sense. His view is shared by another crucial political constituency, the Israeli settler movement. In a stunning op-ed in the *New York Times*, the international spokesman for the Jewish community of Hebron, Yishai Fleisher, offered a candid and blunt assessment of Israel's possible future.¹⁹ He dismissed Israeli attempts to keep the two-state solution in play, arguing that the settlers have never accepted the policy that has "worked to legitimize the idea that the territory of Judea and Samaria is Arab land and that Israel is an intractable occupier." Fleisher rehearses long-standing exclusive claims of Jewish national rights to the land and to "indigenous existence," while dismissing the government's own ambivalence about the territorial conquests of 1967, and he openly invokes the spirit of Begin as a guide for new approaches to the Palestinian issue.

In presenting his view that Israeli sovereignty should be extended across all of the occupied West Bank, Fleisher is mindful of the new administration in Washington. "There is a historic opportunity to have an open discussion of real alternatives," he states, "unhampered by the shibboleths of the past." He dismisses those who would argue that there is no alternative to a two-state model. Rather than make room for another state alongside Israel, he contends,

Arabs can live in Israel, as other minorities do, with personal rights, not national rights. . . . Most settlers say without ambivalence that the two-state solution is dead, and the time has come for a

discussion of new options by which Israel would hold onto the West Bank and eventually assert Israel[i] sovereignty there, just as we did with the Golan Heights and eastern Jerusalem. Yes, Israel will have to grapple with questions of the Arab population's rights, and the issues of the country's security and Jewish character, but we believe those questions can be worked out through the democratic process.

Fleisher proceeds to lay out five alternative options, from the notion that "Jordan is Palestine," to Bennett's plan for annexation of Area C, and perhaps most astonishingly, a new idea for Emirate-like Palestinian cantons hatched by the infamous professor Mordechai Kedar of Bar-Ilan University.²⁰ In Kedar's view, as explained by Fleisher, "the Palestinian Arabs are not a cohesive nation." Rather, they are "comprised of separate city-based clans," and therefore such a plan "proposes Palestinian autonomy for seven non-contiguous emirates in major Arab cities, as well as Gaza, which he [Kedar] considers already an emirate." As for the rest of the areas outside the major cities, Israel would annex them and "offer Israeli citizenship" to their Palestinian inhabitants.²¹

Between Annexation and Separation

In contrast to these various notions of autonomy, the final two ideas cited by Fleisher suggest either a version of annexation plus citizenship, or a proposal for outright population exchange. In her 2014 book, *The Israeli Solution: A One-State Plan for Peace in the Middle East*, journalist Caroline Glick suggested that Jews would not lose their demographic majority between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean, and should therefore not fear annexation.²² Rather, the *Jerusalem Post* journalist advocated, they should assert Israeli law in the West Bank and offer Palestinians citizenship in Israel. Glick's assertion challenges the prevailing view of many demographers, and also leaves Gaza out of the equation. Tzipi Hotovely, Israel's current deputy foreign minister, has also suggested an iteration of Glick's plan with residency rather than automatic citizenship. In her view, only by swearing allegiance to a Jewish State might citizenship be conferred. Others prefer the model of Puerto Rico, in the form of residency rights without voting rights in federal elections.

Israel's president, Reuven Rivlin, has himself aligned with the view of annexation. A longstanding liberal member of the right-wing camp, Rivlin concedes that the extension of Jewish sovereignty in the occupied Palestinian territories necessitates the equal extension of law. "Israel has adopted international law. [International law] does not allow a country acting according to it to apply and enforce its laws on territories that are not under its sovereignty," he said to a Jerusalem gathering of the *B'Sheva* newspaper. "If it does so, it is a legal cacophony. It will cause Israel to be seen as an apartheid state, which it is not."²³ As the president emphasized, "there is no question here. The government of Israel is simply not allowed to apply the laws of the Knesset on territories that are not under the state's sovereignty." Rivlin's position suggests that granting full citizenship to Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories might resolve this tension, but that of course would leave open the broader question of the Jewish state's political identity and demographic character.

Rivlin's warning came in the wake of a settlement outpost legalization bill, approved by the Knesset on 6 February 2017.²⁴ Despite the best efforts of Netanyahu himself, Bennett pushed through the bill before the prime minister's meeting with Trump.²⁵ Accelerated as a response to



Israeli soldiers bundle onto a bus a Jewish settler from the Amona outpost northeast of Ramallah, evacuated in accordance with a High Court ruling. (1 February, Thomas Coex/AFP/Getty Images)

the evacuation of the illegal Amona outpost in early 2017, the bill was intended to bypass legal limitations to the settlement project on private Palestinian land. In essence, the law legalizes land theft from Palestinian landowners. By thumbing Israel's nose at international law, the legislation helps consolidate apartheid-like conditions on the ground.²⁶ Criticisms of this formalization of functional apartheid that ensued in some right-wing quarters evinced an attempt to offer a liberal gloss on what is fast becoming a recipe for the worst possible outcome on the ground: the extension of Jewish sovereignty across the entirety of the occupied Palestinian territories, depriving Palestinians of either equal rights as citizens or real political sovereignty of their own.²⁷

Centrist political leaders have also followed suit, in effect parroting the intentions of the Israeli Right while employing language that opposes annexation. Opposition leader Isaac Herzog outlined his "Ten Point Plan for Israeli-Palestinian Peace" in a *Haaretz* article that appeared in February, suggesting an "updated road map" toward a two-state solution. Premised on the idea of total separation, Herzog envisions a ten-year interim stage before negotiations. "The two peoples will separate from each other, the Palestinian economy will advance, the regional infrastructure will develop and the peace initiative's principles will be implemented," Herzog wrote. Utilizing "moves outside the box," the Labor Party chairman's idea would circumvent the most contested debates over territory by selectively limiting settlement construction. "This is how we'll save the settlement blocs and keep them under Israel's sovereignty. It will be Zionism's real victory," he

concluded.²⁸ The specifics of Herzog's plan are not clearly delineated, nor do they account for Palestinian aspirations in a meaningful sense.

Yair Lapid, chairman of the Yesh Atid (There Is a Future) Party, recently dropped his mention of a demilitarized Palestinian state altogether and replaced it with talk of "separation in very slow stages—fifteen to twenty years, the main element of which will be security arrangements."²⁹ Playing down a two-state outcome, Lapid echoes Herzog's call for prolonged separation without a political resolution. In a radio interview in February, he was very clear about the shortcomings of a two-state outcome and his preference for interim measures. "We don't want a Palestinian state. It's simply the best way to get rid of four million Palestinians whom we want to get out of our lives . . . the question is not whether it's right or not, but how to create the highest wall possible between us and the Palestinians with security guarantees for Israelis."³⁰ Effectively, Lapid's is a path toward structural separation without relinquishing Israeli control.

It is this suspended middle ground—neither one state nor two—that is the greatest risk to Palestinian self-determination, whether in the shape of independent statehood or equal rights within some wider political configuration. Palestinians are well aware of the dangers inherent in the proposals of Hebron's settler leader, and by extension the ideas of Bennett, Kisch, Herzog, Lapid, and Netanyahu himself. The thrust of these alternatives is to reify limited rights in place of either a one-state or two-state outcome. Whether advocating truncated autonomy or unequal residency rather than full citizenship, these ideas are retrograde and pernicious, and they have a checkered historical track record, amounting in practice to a form of Palestinian state prevention.³¹

Netanyahu himself has long been an advocate of the "state-minus" idea for Palestinians.³² First bandied about in the 1990s when he was prime minister in the wake of the Oslo Accords, the concept suggests some form of self-rule minus an army. But the specifics of Netanyahu's vision have always remained hazy, even in his Trump press conference statement asserting Israeli security control west of the Jordan River. As a strong proponent of conflict management, rather than resolution, Netanyahu favors indeterminate ideas that cohere with other attempts to avoid the central question of Palestinian sovereignty.³³

In conjunction with this "state-minus" idea, former U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger suggested to the participants of the 2016 annual Herzliya Conference that an interim agreement for the Palestinians would be preferable to a regional solution.³⁴ Kissinger first provided the blueprint for conflict management during his shuttle diplomacy of the mid-1970s.³⁵ It has since been taken up by others attempting to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, including the leading proponent of interim measures, U.S. ambassador Dennis Ross.³⁶ The longstanding circulation of these ideas in Netanyahu's orbit has both served to defer Palestinian demands for sovereignty and enabled settlement expansion. Whether in think-tank corners or through direct Israeli advocacy, such ideas have often been promoted in Washington as well.

Back in August 1983, a young Netanyahu (then Israel's deputy chief of mission in Washington) attended meetings in the Reagan White House with Israel's ambassador to the United States, Meir Rosenne and Vice President George H. W. Bush. According to declassified minutes of those meetings, which I have found in the Israel State Archives, Bush was deeply opposed to settlement expansion in Israel, criticizing Rosenne's claim that Jews should be permitted to live in the West Bank. "You will have a hard time selling your position here," Bush told the Israeli ambassador.

“The U.S. is the most moderate in the world in its position on settlements, the President is a friend of yours, but he thinks settlements are not conducive to peace.” Netanyahu then argued with Bush that settlements were not the real issue. “Israel’s survival,” he told Bush, “would be in grave doubt if we relinquished control of Judea and Samaria. The settlements there are a sign of Israel’s presence.”³⁷ Bush wholeheartedly refuted such a bold assertion that Israel must retain the occupied Palestinian territories to assure the country’s very survival. After becoming president, one particularly bitter debate erupted around the U.S. refusal to grant Israel loan guarantees of \$10 billion in light of ongoing settlement expansion. Bush’s secretary of state, James Baker, famously recited the number of the White House switchboard at a press conference, telling the Israelis, “When you are serious about peace, call us!”³⁸

With Trump’s election, circumstances have changed in Netanyahu’s favor. He is once again trying to link Israeli security claims with territorially maximalist positions, and finding a more sympathetic hearing in his meetings with U.S. officials. Reports have surfaced that Netanyahu even raised the possibility of the United States recognizing Israel’s 1981 annexation of the Golan Heights, which the U.S. government still treats as occupied Syrian territory.³⁹ It is clear that the transition from the Obama to the Trump administration is paving the way for major shifts on core aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian and wider Arab-Israeli conflict. New regional dynamics have also played a large part in this transformation, and arrangements that at one time seemed unthinkable are now very much on the table.

Ethnic States

Before turning to the regional landscape, there is one key Israeli avenue for resolving the Palestinian question that demands closer attention: demographic engineering. In its most unreconstructed form, it is what former deputy speaker of the Knesset Moshe Feiglin advocates as part of the platform of Zehut, his breakaway party from the Likud: “Jewish sovereignty in all parts of the Land of Israel, and encouragement of voluntary emigration of the Arabs in Judea and Samaria. Arabs who choose to remain may do so as permanent residents, after making a declaration of loyalty to the Jewish state. The option of receiving Israeli citizenship will be given after a protracted cooling-off period and compliance with conditions to be specified.”⁴⁰

How exactly would this “voluntary emigration” proceed? Along with Martin Sherman of the Israel Institute for Strategic Studies, Feiglin advocates that the “Arab populations must be diminished—preferably by noncoercive means, such as economic inducements.”⁴¹ Citing the precedent of what they described as Jewish expulsion from Arab lands in the aftermath of 1948, Feiglin and Sherman suggest that “Palestinians in Judea and Samaria would be offered generous compensation to emigrate voluntarily.”⁴² Presumably, the failure to induce Palestinians to leave voluntarily would trigger coerced population transfer.

A far more developed vision for separating the two populations has recently been put forward by Israel’s defense minister, Avigdor Lieberman. In a far-reaching and unprecedented interview conducted in Arabic by the Palestinian *al-Quds* newspaper, Lieberman suggested the total separation of Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs.⁴³ Among other revealing proposals, Lieberman’s central point in the interview was to reiterate his belief in a two-state solution, albeit based on

strict separatism. Instead of the concept of “land for peace,” enshrined in UN Security Council Resolution 242, Lieberman—the founder of the Yisrael Beytenu (Israel Is Our Home) Party born in Soviet-era Moldova—proposes “land for people” instead. Advocating that the large settlement blocs in the West Bank and East Jerusalem become Israeli, and that Palestinian towns and villages inside Israel become Palestinian, he rejects the notion of an Israeli state with Palestinian citizens existing alongside a Palestinian state with no Jews. In short, his vision is of “two nations, Jewish and Palestinian, and not one Palestinian and another binational,” referring to the 20 percent Palestinian minority in Israel.⁴⁴ Without clarifying whether transfer would be limited exclusively to the Wadi Ara borderlands, Lieberman is vague about how he envisions achieving this goal of ethnic separation and what it means for mixed Arab-Jewish cities within Israel. Earlier instances of his plans, most notably his suggestion to shift the border of Umm al-Fahm against the will of its inhabitants, leaves little to the imagination.⁴⁵

Ethnically homogenous states along such lines may have been an ideal of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Europe, but the implications are grating for self-identifying liberal Zionists in the twenty-first century. Israel’s former foreign minister and opposition MK Tzipi Livni, for example, has also advocated for separation into two states, guided by concerns to preserve Jewishness but always with a nod to the liberal democratic protections for minority groups. Lieberman, however, admits that Palestinians inside Israel would always exist as second-class citizens. Rather than promote such a condition, he wants to see exclusive Jewish self-determination in Israel, a state that would be ethnically cleansed of Palestinians. By removing the mask of liberal Zionism—going some way in conceding that Israel cannot be both democratic and Jewish—Lieberman voices a greater concern for Israel’s exclusive Jewishness. Unlike Netanyahu, who wants to maintain Israeli security west of the Jordan without conceding rights, Lieberman is ready to give up on territory as long as he can secure the principle of ethnic homogeneity.

In denaturalizing Palestinians inside Israel, Lieberman’s plan is therefore at odds with more traditional visions of two-state separation, as well as with the proponents of either renewed autonomy or annexation. The prerequisite for his vision is rooted in the advancement of economic interests and development (especially in Area C of the West Bank), and the full economic development of the Gaza Strip on condition of Hamas’s demilitarization. Echoes of this “economic peace” were made clear during the nomination hearings for Trump’s recently confirmed ambassador to Israel (and former lawyer) David Friedman, who gamely touted such views while at the same time claiming that the two-state solution “remained the best possibility for peace in the region.”⁴⁶ “Economic peace” remains popular among leading policymakers in the Trump administration. After a meeting with Bennett as part of a listening tour with Israeli and Palestinian officials, Trump’s special representative for international negotiations, Jason Greenblatt, tweeted about the “importance of working to improve the economic life of Palestinians.”⁴⁷

Obama’s Legacy

There is reason to see these voices not as outliers, but as part of an emerging U.S. consensus that is moving away from Palestinian sovereignty, with roots stretching back to the Obama administration. As was argued in these pages some months ago, the legacy of Obama’s eight years

in office is ultimately the bequest of a new paradigm that dispenses with the two-state model⁴⁸—even though U.S. acquiescence to the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 2334 in the final days of 2016 may have helped restore a traditional path.

In laying out a clear position on territory, settlements, and the inadmissibility and illegality of unilateral changes to the 1967 lines, Resolution 2334 maintains the principle of “land for peace.” Unlike Lieberman’s call for ethnic separation, Bennett’s “autonomy on steroids,” or Netanyahu’s “state-minus,” the resolution’s text reads as a reaffirmation of a longstanding international commitment to a version of the two-state solution that preserves (in principle) contiguous territorial sovereignty. The resolution also calls for member states “to distinguish, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967.”⁴⁹ The introduction of a mechanism for differentiation along these lines, and the legal language opposing settlement expansion even in the case of “natural growth,” underscores a baseline for preserving Palestinian sovereignty claims and the possibility of international legal sanction should colonization continue unabated.

At the same time, the resolution contains no enforcement mechanism. Against the backdrop of unchecked settlement expansion, such a belated measure may therefore have little power to reverse the staggering transformations already underway in the occupied Palestinian territories. Expanding on the U.S. abstention from the Security Council vote, and the principles that governed the Obama administration’s policies, the departing secretary of state, John Kerry, offered an extensive defense of the U.S. position. His exhortations, however, may have been “too little and too late.”⁵⁰ Yet despite its shortcomings, and the late timing, the passage of the UN vote did in fact demonstrate to Palestinians that diplomatic pressure can be brought to bear in response to their precarious position on the ground. It therefore served as a meaningful coda to the frustration of the Obama years, highlighting the ways in which a diplomatic “no” can be a powerful tool for Palestinians, one that will inevitably have to be exercised with greater frequency in the months and years ahead.

Regional Work-Arounds

In light of the Obama legacy, is there a plausible argument to be made that Trump’s victory, like Netanyahu’s reelection in 2015, could somehow be “good for Palestine”?⁵¹ While it certainly has clarified the contours of political debate and widened the options under diplomatic consideration, the early months of 2017 have not been promising. From the Knesset’s legalization of settlement outposts to the destruction of homes in the so-called unrecognized village of Umm al-Hiran in the Negev, the prospects look bleak.⁵² Moreover, the convergence of Trump and Netanyahu around a “regional approach” involving “newfound Arab partners in the pursuit of a broader peace and peace with the Palestinians” raises further troubling signals.⁵³ Such an approach may be used as a tool to promote diplomatic negotiations—like the Arab League’s reaffirmation of the Arab Peace Initiative at its Amman summit in March—but it can also serve to sideline the Palestinians.⁵⁴

The circuitous avoidance of direct engagement with the Palestinians in favor of regional powers purporting to represent them has a long and checkered history. From Egypt’s representation of Palestinian interests in the 1979–82 autonomy talks, to Jordan’s role in the 1987 Peres-Hussein

London Agreement and the joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation at Madrid in 1991, regional allies have often served as enablers of various U.S. peace initiatives. More often than not, this has not worked in the Palestinians' favor. The context of 2017, however, presents a new challenge: the unprecedented and de facto normalization between Israel and the Gulf countries, from high-tech collaboration to talk of a train line extending from Haifa to the Arabian Peninsula.⁵⁵ Recent regional gas deals in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the currently shared interest between Israel and so-called Sunni Arab states to counter Iranian influence, have further reconfigured geopolitical relations in problematic ways.⁵⁶

Against this backdrop, Netanyahu's intimations of "outside-in" peacemaking and the use of regional alliances that he discussed in his meeting with Trump are not entirely surprising.⁵⁷ In fact, reports have emerged of a scuttled attempt by Netanyahu to push through a deal with Jordan's King Abdullah and Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Aqaba in 2016.⁵⁸ Abandoning the Aqaba exercise as his domestic coalition talks ran aground, Netanyahu reportedly told Kerry that he could not sell a renewal of this approach to his right-wing government. This has not stopped his minister of intelligence, Yisrael Katz, from pushing regional solutions in further meetings with Trump. "Relations already exist between Israel and Sunni Arab states in the region," Katz told an interviewer from the *Washington Post*. "We are not allowed to say which but they do include countries where we have no peace agreement or diplomatic relations."⁵⁹ Beyond intelligence sharing, Katz emphasized "regional economic peace," suggesting that it would help "bring about the diplomatic, political peace, which is more complicated for all different reasons."⁶⁰ The devil, as always, is in the details. It is worth recalling the words of Likud MK Kisch, who also spoke of a regional solution as part of his autonomy plan revival: "The plan is not perfect, and I cannot solve this issue at present . . . it would be pushed off into the future, when a solution within a regional discussion with Egypt and Jordan might be arrived at."⁶¹ In this way, regional work-arounds also serve as a means of deferring Palestinian sovereignty indefinitely.

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Given the emerging constellation of Israeli alternatives to sovereignty, a White House overly solicitous of Netanyahu, and an inhospitable regional environment, how might the Palestinians respond? The priority might be to frame demands for citizenship and sovereignty in the clearest possible manner, resisting notions of truncated autonomy at every turn.⁶² Israelis are increasingly aware that the possibility of maintaining the state's Jewish character alongside its democratic identity is strained as never before. Even the right wing has been forced to articulate alternatives, both as a means of avoiding the accusation of apartheid and in order to curtail the growing demands to provide Palestinians under their control with political rights. Rather than choosing a more expansive definition of citizenship that would accommodate non-Jews in line with a civic Israeli identity, the march toward narrow ethnic forms of belonging seem to have solidified.⁶³

In Trump's America, this dissonance is now debated openly among the political class, without the repercussions that used to inhibit honest political discussion of the Palestinian predicament.⁶⁴ The fraying attempt to align Jewishness and democracy does not sit well with the same progressive class so openly battling Trump's wider agenda. Emerging forms of Jewish-Muslim solidarity, for example, speak to more profound changes ahead.⁶⁵

Domestically, Netanyahu faces increasing pressure from those demanding either outright annexation (of the occupied Palestinian territories) or new forms of autonomy. Some would argue that he still has no real intention of abandoning the two-state solution.⁶⁶ But the evidence is mounting that a collision with Bennett is on the immediate horizon.⁶⁷ Netanyahu therefore clings to his “prerequisites for peace” without outlining a more detailed solution to the Palestinian question, avoiding the one-state model of annexation and citizenship along Rivlin’s lines, or a modified two-state model that either accommodates minorities⁶⁸ or removes them entirely from ethnically defined state borders.

The more dangerous outcome, and also the more likely to take root, is the in-between model of autonomy. The significance of autonomy’s revival has not been fully understood, with observers instead outlining the grave risk is in “inching toward a one state solution.”⁶⁹ In actual fact, Netanyahu stops short of such an outcome. Rather than answering the unresolved questions of 1967 with direct annexation or territorial return, seeking an end that enables Israel’s “overriding security control over the entire area west of the Jordan River” confers no political rights on the inhabitants who live there. In fact far predating the 1993 Oslo Accords, this vision has always foreclosed a sovereign outcome for Palestinians: neither two states nor one.

Netanyahu’s February 2017 visit to the United States clarifies Israel’s attempt to legitimize a variant of a solution to the Palestinian question that has always been at the margins but is now having its moment in the sun: a “state-minus,” a truncated form of self-rule, the triumph of Begin’s own vision of “autonomy for individuals but not for territory”—or as Fleisher put it, “personal rights, not national rights.” If Netanyahu were to promote such an approach, he would make himself sound reasonable to the new administration, and further corner the Palestinians. Since there is also a real possibility that the Trump White House would endorse and promote such an idea,⁷⁰ it is critical for it to be understood more concretely, and in historical context.

Palestinians are unlikely to acquiesce to such a scheme, or to a regional deal that circumvents them and bypasses sovereignty. What precisely might emerge from the constellation of measures for economic advancement and opaque coordination with neighboring countries on new peace initiatives remains to be seen. A new approach may incorporate the formalizing of provisional borders via a U.S.-Israeli understanding on the boundaries of settlement blocs and some form of a building slowdown outside those areas.⁷¹ There remains a real possibility that something along these unilateral lines—combining elements of an autonomy plan, territorial annexation, and the shell of a two-state model—would thereby cohere into a “solution” for the Palestinian question.⁷² If the U.S. government formally endorses such alternatives to meaningful sovereignty, the power of the Palestinian refusal to capitulate will be more necessary than ever before. Beyond refusing to play Trump’s or Netanyahu’s game, however, the question of how to direct the Palestinian national struggle remains as relevant as ever.⁷³ Whether the Palestinians demand citizenship across all of the occupied Palestinian territories or separation into independent states with redoubled efforts to secure meaningful sovereignty, a viable response requires a return to the underlying principle of self-determination.⁷⁴

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