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RECEIVED 29 June 2022

ACCEPTED 06 April 2023

PUBLISHED 28 April 2023

CITATION

Shemer-Kunz Y (2023) Annexation,
normalization and the two-state solution in
Israel-Palestine. *Front. Polit. Sci.* 5:981237.
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2023.981237

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Annexation, normalization and the two-state solution in Israel-Palestine

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How Israelis and Palestinians see the conflict between both groups and its eventual solution? Based on 38 in-depth interviews with Israeli and Palestinian political leaders, the article analyzes the Palestinian choice of the two-state solution as the best way to bring an end to the Israeli occupation of 1967. The article then explores the Israeli policy of annexation of the West Bank and the entrenchment of apartheid—a one-state reality of unequal rights from the river to the sea. While the Israeli interviewed attempt to normalize this one-state reality, the Palestinians oppose these attempts of normalization and perceive the emerging debate on the need to reconsider the two-state solution as part of Israel's efforts to normalize the facts on the ground. Finally, the article explores the particular position of the Palestinians in Israel, who were not part of the national project of Palestinian statehood and hence developed their own future vision, based on equal citizenship. The article concludes that more research is needed on this particular group.

KEYWORDS

Israel, Palestine, two-state-solution, one-state reality, apartheid, annexation

Introduction

Thirty years after the Oslo Accords of 1993, the paradigm of partition of the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River into two separate nation-states seems less and less relevant¹ and more and more observers and policy-makers openly question the feasibility of the two-state solution for Israel-Palestine.² Arguably, an Israeli withdrawal from the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967 seems very unlikely if not already impossible (Lustick, 2019). In addition to the ever growing number of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, important organizational and administrative changes in Israel's control over the area in the beginning of 2023³ indicate that the state of Israel is effectively annexing the West Bank, even though without any formal declaration of annexation.⁴

1 See the report "Two states or one? Reappraising Israeli-Palestinian impasse", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018.

2 For instance, a survey among experts, conducted by the journal *Foreign Affairs* in 2021, found that nearly half of the participants in the survey, 24 out of 59, either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is no longer viable." See article "Is the Two-State Solution Still Viable?", *Foreign Affairs*, 24 August, 2021, Section Ask the Experts.

3 See memorandum of understanding and division of responsibilities and authorities between the Minister of Defense and the additional Minister of Defense of 23 February 2023 (Hebrew). See also Makovsky, David, David Patkin and Gabriel Epstein, "Israel Expands Settlements as Smotrich Increases His Authority", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Analysis/PolicyWatch 3709, March 1, 2023.

4 Levine-Schnur, Ronit, Tamar Megiddo and Yael Berda, "A Theory of Annexation", *SSRN*, Available online at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4330388> (accessed February 5, 2023).

Admittedly, Israel's presence in the West Bank is not merely a temporary situation of military occupation. Israeli policy of massive investment in building and development of settlements, infrastructure and services over the last few decades is a policy of *de facto* annexation of large parts of the West Bank. The border between Israel and the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, known as the 1949 Armistice Lines or the Green Line, was erased for the Israelis as a result of the Israeli policies: "one cannot separate between 1967 and 1948. This is the reality."⁵ The result today is a "one-state reality" of unequal rights between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, in which the Israeli and the Palestinian populations live on the same territory but do not enjoy equal rights—a situation which is more and more define as a system of apartheid.⁶

Acknowledging the entrenchment of this one-state reality on the ground, this study examines whether the local political leadership develop an alternative political vision which is not based on a territorial partition of the land. The article focuses in particular on the perceptions of Palestinians and Israeli settlers in the West Bank, assessing what is the political horizon from their own perspectives.

Research methods

This article is mainly based on data collected through original field research in Israel-Palestine. In total of 38 in-depth extensive interviews were conducted⁷ with elected politicians, civil society representatives and public opinion leaders in Israel-Palestine, in Hebrew and in Arabic, between October 2021 and February 2022.⁸ 21 interviews were conducted with Palestinians: 12 among West Bank Palestinians⁹ and nine with Palestinian citizens of

Israel.¹⁰ In addition, 17 Jewish Israelis were interviewed, among them 9 elected politicians from large Jewish settlements in the West Bank¹¹, two civil society representatives living in the West Bank and six prominent members of the Israeli "peace camp" which calls to end the occupation.¹² In addition, two interviews were conducted with European observers of the conflict. The article is based on these interviews, complemented by relevant written documents and publications as well as participation in political meetings, conferences and demonstrations in Israel-Palestine between October 2021 and February 2022.

The article provides the following findings. First, the political horizon of the Israeli West Bank settlers is economic peace. The Israeli settlers interviewed claim that the West Bank Palestinians are willing to let go of their national aspirations and dreams in exchange for a better daily life and economic welfare. However, all the Palestinians interviewed in this study claim that this political horizon is a fantasy or wishful thinking, saying that the Palestinian people will never give up their national struggle for their collective rights in their own land. In addition, the article finds that different actors in Israel-Palestine still hold on to the two-state solution: the Palestinians see this solution as the embodiment of the international commitment to the Palestinian national movement, embracing Palestinian statehood as a symbol of fighting occupation, annexation and apartheid. The Israeli "peace camp" uses the two-state solution simply as a way to signal

Among these 12 political leaders five are Fatah affiliated politicians; two are Hamas-affiliated politicians; one is a representative of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP); one is a representative of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP); one is a non-affiliated politician; one is a civil society representative promoting the establishment of an Israeli-Palestinian confederation; one is a civil society representative promoting the creation of a One Democratic State (ODS). Among these 12 interviews, four were conducted in Nablus, four in Bethlehem, three in Ramallah and one in Tulkarem. One of the 12 interviewees, one is a woman. All these 12 interviews were conducted between mid-January and mid-February 2022.

10 Nine interviews among Palestinian citizens of Israel were conducted: one Member of the Knesset; four members of the municipal council of the city of Umm al-Fahm, one member of the city council of the mixed city of Lod/AI-Lydd; as well as three prominent public opinion leaders in civil society. Most interviewees are affiliated with Hadash party, while a minority with Balad party. Two of these nine persons are women.

11 Nine elected representatives at the local level in Israeli settlements in the West Bank were interviewed, representing a certain variety of opinions within the rather mainstream Jewish population living in the West Bank: three are from Ma'ale Adumim, two from Ariel, three from Gush Etzion settlement bloc, and one from the northern West Bank area, or "Samaria". All of these nine politicians are members of the ruling coalitions in the local settlements councils. Party affiliation is largely Likud (6 out of 9), alongside "Jewish Home" and "Yamina". The average age of the interviewees is 46 years old: four of them are under 40; two between 40–50, while only three are above 50. Hence, they represent the emerging political elite of the Jewish settlers in the West Bank. Most of the settlers interviewees are orthodox Jews, while three of them are not religious. Out of the nine, only two are women politicians.

12 Among these six, two are Members of the Knesset—one of Meretz and one from Hadash—while the other four are engaged in peace initiatives and campaigns.

5 Tehila Friedman, former Member of the Knesset of the "Blue White" party (center left), "A Land for All" public panel "Whose Land Is It? Greater Israel or Confederation", 4 April 2022, online.

6 On the question whether the term "Apartheid" is appropriate to define the situation in Israel-Palestine see the recent reports: "The Israeli Occupation of the West Bank and the Crime of Apartheid: Legal Opinion, Position paper of June 2020, *Yesh Din*"; "A regime of Jewish supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This is apartheid", *B'Tselem*, January 2021; "A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crime of Apartheid and Persecution", *Human Rights Watch*, April 2021; "Israel's Apartheid Against Palestinians: Cruel system of domination and crime against humanity", *Amnesty International*, February 2022; "Israeli Apartheid: Tool of Zionist Settler Colonialism", *Al-Haq*, 2022; Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, *United Nations Human Rights Council*, 25 March 2022.

7 Names of interviewees and dates of interviews are provided for the interviewees who gave the author written, informed consent for the publication of this information.

8 The interviewees were asked very open questions: how do they see the conflict? How do they see the solution to it? How they see the way forward towards this solution? The questions were formulated as open as possible in order to obtain an authentic discourse, with the peoples' own words and their own perspectives.

9 These 12 interviews were conducted in the West Bank, in Arabic, by a Palestinian journalist. The interviewees requested to remain anonymous.

that some solution has to be found, as an alternative to the current unacceptable and unsustainable one-state reality.

The article proceeds as follows. First we analyze the Palestinian choice of the two-state solution as the best way to achieve an end to the Israeli occupation, based on UN resolutions and international law. We then shed light on the Israeli on-going policy of annexation of the West Bank and the entrenchment of a one-state reality of unequal rights from the river to the sea as well as the Israeli attempts to normalize this emerging one-state reality. An exploration of the Palestinian opposition to this normalization follows. We also analyze how, in this context of annexation and normalization, the Palestinians see the emerging idea to reconsider the two-state solution as a risk of normalization of the Israeli annexation, accepting the facts on the ground that Israel is imposing on them. Finally, we explore the particular position of the Palestinians in Israel, who were not part of the national project of Palestinian statehood and therefore developed their own future vision of equal rights. We conclude that more research is needed on this particular group, and especially on mixed cities in Israel, where Arab Palestinians live together with Jewish Israelis under common municipal authorities.

The Palestinian choice of the two-state solution

The origins of the current situation in Israel-Palestine is the project to create a Jewish state in Palestine and its settler colonial nature. It started with the growing opposition of the indigenous Arab Palestinian population to the Zionist project of an exclusive Jewish sovereignty in their land. The Arab Palestinian local leadership opposed the growing flow of Zionist immigration from Europe and its dynamic settlement movement in Palestine already in the 1920s.¹³

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War, the League of Nations adopted a British mandate for Palestine in 1922. The British mandate incorporated the principles of the Balfour declaration¹⁴ of 1917, which expressed the British support of “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people”, also declaring that “nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of the existing non-Jewish communities.” This fundamental distinction between the recognition of the national right to self-determination to the “Jewish people” in Palestine, recognized as a people, while merely civil and cultural rights to the “non-Jewish Arab communities”, remains the very essence of the conflict today—whose land is it?

In 1947 the United Nations (UN) proposed the partition plan—a plan of partition and economic union, composed of independent Arab and Jewish states, and a special international regime for the city of Jerusalem.¹⁵ In fact, this was the original “two-state solution”

of the question of Palestine. According to the UN proposal, the Jews, who constituted only around a third of the population at the time, were to receive approximately 55% of Mandatory Palestine (also in order to accommodate future immigrants) while the Arab Palestinian, around two-thirds of the population at the time, were to receive 45% of the territory. The Zionist leadership endorsed the Partition Plan for its official international recognition of the right of the Jewish people to establish a Jewish state in Palestine, which was still mainly inhabited by Arabs at the time, while the Arab leadership rejected it as fundamentally unjust and against the will of the vast majority of the local population.

During the war of 1947–1948—Israel’s “War of Independence” and the Palestinian catastrophe, the *Nakba*—Zionist armed forces expelled approximately 700,000 Arab inhabitants of Palestine, most of them in the areas designated by the UN to become the future Jewish state. The 1949 armistice agreements between Israel, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria demarcated the Green Line, leaving the new State of Israel in control over 78% of historic Palestine. Israel did not allow the Palestinian refugees to return to their homes, despite UN resolution 194 on that matter, known as the Palestinians’ right of return.¹⁶

Since 1948 onwards the Palestinians, and the entire Arab world, simply called to “liberate Palestine” and refused to recognize the state of Israel. The Palestinian political leadership called for the liberation of Palestine from the colonial “Zionist entity”, refusing to recognize the Jewish collective rights on this land. The National Covenant of the PLO of 1964 stated that Palestine is “one integral territorial unit” and that it is “the homeland of the Palestinian Arab people.”

However, around the late 1970s and the 1980s the Palestinian leadership shifted to adopt the idea to establish a Palestinian state *alongside Israel*, on 22% only of historic Palestine, accepting the “two state-solution”:

“It was only in the aftermath of the 1967 war and the international consensus on UN Security Council Resolution 242 as a framework for peace in the Middle East that the Palestinian national movement made the project of an independent state the vehicle for decolonizing Palestine from Zionism and affirming the Palestinian right to self-determination” (Farsakh, 2021; p. 3).

This was a very important shift in the Palestinian strategy from an anti-colonial liberation struggle of their historic homeland of Palestine to the demand to establish an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel. For the Palestinians, the call for independent statehood on 22% only of their historic homeland was accepting the solution that had the most international support and legitimacy. This was not an ideological choice but a pragmatic one, a realistic decision to accept what seems to be possible to achieve in reality and to adhere to the international consensus on the envisaged solution to the conflict.

13 The Palestinian local leadership also opposed the British mandate in Palestine which endorsed the Zionist movement as a European ally in the Middle East. Also see Cohen (2015) (translated from Hebrew).

14 Letter of November 2nd 1917 from the United Kingdom’s Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to Lord Rothschild.

15 United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 of 29 November 1947.

16 United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194 of 11 December 1948 stipulates that “the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date”.

The Palestinians still see this shift today as a historical compromise, giving up 78% of their homeland which they lost in 1948. In fact, even though the Fatah movement and the Palestinian Authority (PA) today advocate for the two-state solution as the only pragmatic option which enjoy a large international consensus, the majority of the Palestinian population would still dream of liberating the entire territory of historic Palestine, if that would be considered feasible in reality (Mi'ari, 2021).

The Palestinian leadership today is holding to its demand to establish a Palestinian state in 22% of historic Palestine, hence the two-state solution, even though it is sometimes wielding a “one-state option” as kind of a threat to frighten Israelis of what will happen to them if they do not withdraw from the West Bank. For instance, the President of the PA, Mahmoud Abbas, stated at the UN General Assembly:

“If the Israeli occupation authorities continue to entrench the reality of one apartheid state as is happening today, our Palestinian people and the entire world will not tolerate such a situation and circumstances on the ground will inevitably impose equal and full political rights for all on the land of historical Palestine, within one state. In all cases, Israel has to choose”¹⁷.

But threatening the Israelis with a demand for full equal rights in the framework of a single state does not seem to move them toward a two-state solution, and the one-state option of equal rights is completely unimaginable for them. Michael Manekin, the former director of the Israeli Non-Governmental Organization Breaking the Silence, and a vocal advocate for the two-state solution, explains: “if there is no political will in Israel for a withdrawal to 1967, there is even less political will for equality.”¹⁸

The Palestinians, and the shrinking Israeli “peace camp”, advocate for the two-state solution, even though they do not truly believe this is still possible anymore, or that we are going in that direction. They only use the two-state formula because there is no other alternative in sight. Their main focus, though, is not the end-game but the need to put an end to the current situation of occupation and apartheid. Alon Liel of the Israeli “peace camp” explains how he sees the fight for the two-state solution in Israeli society today:

“Personally, I would like two states. But today to fight for two states looks almost pathetic. Therefore, even though we do it, we do it in order to keep in the consciousness the idea that some solution is needed, and that there is still someone who is interested in it, who deals with it.”¹⁹

17 Statement by Mr. Mahmoud Abbas, President of the State of Palestine, United Nations General Assembly, General Debate of the 76th Session, 24 September 2021.

18 Interview with Michael Manekin, a prominent member of the Israeli “peace camp”, 2nd February 2022, Jerusalem.

19 Interview with Alon Liel, a former Israeli diplomat, 24 November 2021, Herzliya.

Israel's policy of annexation

As for February 2023, almost 700,000 Israelis live in the West Bank and East Jerusalem²⁰: 465,400 live in settlements in the West Bank in addition to 229,377 Jewish Israeli citizens who live in East-Jerusalem.²¹ One out of 10 Israeli citizens live in the West Bank. But the Israeli settlements in the West Bank are not only impressive because of the sheer numbers of settlers, on the rise every year, but also because the Jewish settler movement in the West Bank is an extremely powerful sector in Israeli society, army and politics (Zertal and Eldar, 2004). Based on religious Zionist ideology, a combination of radical nationalist and orthodox religious beliefs, this movement is much more powerful than only the numbers of settlers.²²

There are today 132 Israeli settlements in the West Bank, which were established by the Israeli government, in addition to 147 “illegal outposts”, which were established since the 1990s with no government's formal decision. On February 2023 the Israeli government retroactively granted a legal status to 9 illegal outposts, hence raising the number of Israeli settlements to 141. According to the Israel Policy Forum, the granting of retroactive legal status to illegal outposts would “damage prospects for an eventual transfer of the bulk of Area C to the Palestinians, thus posing a significant barrier to a two-state outcome.”²³

Israeli law notwithstanding, all the Israeli settlements which were established in the territories occupied by Israel since 1967 are illegal under international law and consist a violation of numerous UN Council Resolutions, “and yet, they are there, and it seems that they are there to stay, since uprooting them is beyond the capability of any Israeli government” (Kuttab, 2020; p. 18). Considering the political weight of the settlers' movement in Israeli politics, the political price Israeli government would have to pay is probably too high already today. Hugh Lovatt, a senior policy advisor of the influential think tank European Council of Foreign Affairs (ECFR), says that the Israel' government can still physically evacuate 200,000 settlers, but the question is rather whether there is a political ability to do that: “Every additional settler increases the political price that a future Israeli government would have to pay to make a two-state solution possible.”²⁴ Lovatt estimates that an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank is no longer possible: “It probably did not seem

20 According to the Israeli organization “Peace Now”. Available online at: www.peacenow.org.il (accessed March 2, 2023).

21 Mainly in the neighborhoods of Ramot, Pisgat-Ze'ev, Gilo, Neve-Ya'akov and Har-Homa.

22 “Gush Emunim” (‘bloc of the faithful’) settler movement was an extremely influential in Israel, later to become more institutionalized in the form of today's “Yesha Council”. Its ideology may be described as messianic and fundamentalist, inspired by the teachings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935) who founded the important “Merkaz HaRav” Yeshiva in 1924 in Jerusalem, and his son, rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook (1891–1982). Followers of this spiritual religious movement established numerous Jewish settlements in the West Bank already in the 1970s.

23 Available online at: Israelpolicyforum.org (accessed March 2, 2023).

24 Interview with Hugh Lovatt, European Council of Foreign Relations (ECFR), 11 November 2021, by zoom.

possible when there were less settlers, and I don't see how it's any more possible today or how it will be more possible tomorrow."²⁵

Already since 1967 Israel faced a binary political choice: to give up of the dream of Greater Israel (the biblical term *Eretz Yisrael* in Hebrew, meaning "The Land of Israel") and withdraw from the West Bank (which today even the Israeli journal of the mainstream Zionist left *Haaretz* calls by the biblical names of two regions, Judea and Samaria), or an open-ended occupation and *de-facto* annexation. This is not the first time that Israel conducts a policy of annexation: Israel annexed East Jerusalem already in 1967 and it annexed the Syrian Golan Heights in 1981, 14 years after it occupied the area from Syria in 1967. The "one-state reality" of today is the result of Israel's choice to keep its control over the Palestinian territories occupied during the Six-Day War. Hugh Lovatt continues: "for me it's very clear that the trajectory since 1967, maybe with a few exceptions here and there, but broadly speaking, has been one of continued at least *de facto* annexation of Palestinian territory."²⁶

After the eruption of the first Intifada—the Palestinian popular uprising against the Israeli military occupation—in December 1987, and particularly after the declaration of independence of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) of November 1988 regarding the territories occupied by Israel since 1967, Israel could have chosen the "two-state solution" of two sovereign states, living side by side, an updated version of the UN partition plan of 1947.²⁷ Arguably, in the end of the 1980s Israeli society was very much divided on the question of the future of the "territories" (*Shtakhim* in Hebrew, a neutral term between the term "West Bank", used by the Palestinians and the international community, and "Judea and Samaria", the biblical terms of the Land of Israel). However, looking on this same issue more than 30 years later, it seems that the Israelis have made their choice. Alon Liel, a former Israeli diplomat, and a senior member of the Israeli shrinking "peace camp", explains:

"There is no longer an ideological struggle in Israel around this. If I go back 30 years, there were two ideologies: there was the ideology of two-states, and there was the ideology of Greater Israel. In other words, there was the ideology of "land for peace" and the ideology of "peace for peace." The second ideology won. Not a victory of 2:1. it won 7:1. A great victory."²⁸

Looking back today with some perspective of time, the Israeli governments, even though without a clear and explicit decision, actually conducted policies of *de facto* annexation of the West Bank since at least five decades, with a few timid elements of *de jure* annexation.

A serious step in the process toward *de jure* annexation of the West Bank was illustrated by Israel's Nation-state Law, adopted in 2018. Echoing with the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and Israel's declaration of independence of May 1948, the basic law begins with

the declaration: "The Land of Israel is the historical homeland of the Jewish people, in which the State of Israel was established."²⁹ This is the first time in Israel's legislation that we find a reference to the biblical term of "the Land of Israel", or *Eretz-Yisrael* in Hebrew. This fundamental, semi-constitutional law also declares that "the exercise of the right to national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish People."

While the borders of the State of Israel are not defined in the law, it stipulates that "Jerusalem, complete and united, is the capital of Israel."³⁰ Hence, together with the reference to the biblical term of the "Land of Israel" as the historical homeland of the Jewish people, this basic law is a major step in the process of Israel's *de jure* annexation of the West Bank, to accompany its already on-going process of *de facto* annexation, creating facts on the ground.

Israel's approach of normalization

Normalization of the policies of annexation and the deepening of the one-state reality of unequal rights is the mainstream Israeli approach and how Israelis see the way forward. Israelis believe they can neither withdraw from the West Bank nor fully annex it today, giving Israeli citizenship to around 2.5 Million Palestinians. Hence, Israel is trapped in a situation similar of catch-22, or rather, catch-67 (Goodman, 2017) with no possibility to resolve the conflict.

Therefore, the Israeli approach toward the conflict shifted from an ambition, dominant in the 1990s, to find a solution to it—achieving a peace agreement through negotiations with a Palestinian partner based on partition and territorial retreat—to the current Israeli approach of "conflict management" or "shrinking the conflict" (Goodman, 2019). The idea is to achieve a maximum level of security, stability and international legitimacy for Israel while pursuing the current annexation policy of the West Bank³¹ while achieving a minimum level of resistance from the Palestinian population and a minimum level of international pressure to change this policy.³²

The mainstream Israeli approach of "shrinking the conflict" sees the conflict with the Palestinians as a given, a fact of life, or simply a destiny, with apathy and indifference. The old framework of "land for peace" was replaced by "peace for peace" or "economic peace", based on economic partnerships and cooperation, without any fundamental change in the situation in the West Bank and Gaza, a stability of the current status-quo and the post-Oslo security cooperation and economic arrangements.

Indeed, the process of Israel's *de-facto* annexation of the West Bank and deepening Apartheid is accompanied with a strategic

29 "Basic Law: Israel—the Nation State of the Jewish People" of 19 July 2018.

30 Article 3, "State Capital", of the "Basic Law: Israel—the Nation State of the Jewish People" of 19 July 2018.

31 Mainly Area C of the Oslo Accords, representing 60% of the territory of the West Bank.

32 Amos Yadlin, Udi Dekel and Kim Lavi, "A Strategic Framework for the Israeli-Palestinian Arena", *The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS)*, Tel-Aviv University, Special publication, March 2019.

25 Idem.

26 Idem.

27 See United Nations resolution 181 of 29 November 1947, the "Partition Plan for Palestine".

28 Interview with Alon Liel, a former Israeli diplomat, 24 November 2021, Herzliya.

Israeli political project of normalization of this entrenched “one-state reality”, an acceptance of this reality as legitimate by the local population, by the Arab states and by the international community. Since the past few decades Israel is in an incremental process of normalization with its Arab neighbors, thus breaking the Arab League boycott of Israel, adopted in 1945. With the Peace accords between Israel and Egypt in 1979, between Israel and the PLO in 1993, then with Jordan in 1994, the Arab boycott has been weakened dramatically.

More recently, in 2020, Israel signed normalization agreements with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, known as the Abraham Accords.³³ Following these accords Sudan and Morocco also normalized their relations with Israel.³⁴ Hence, there is an ongoing process of normalization of Israel in the Middle East, the acceptance of the Jewish state by its Arab neighbors. While the 2002 Arab initiative of the Arab League conditioned normalization with Israel with achieving a solution to the conflict with the Palestinians, now the Palestinians seem to be totally forgotten and left behind, as several Arab countries established formal relations with Israel, without any conditionality or linkage with progress in the Middle East Peace Process with the Palestinians. This recent wave of normalization between Israel and several Arab countries is a significant diplomatic and strategic victory for Israel and a great blow in the face of the Palestinian national struggle:

“The Abraham Accords were a great achievement for Israel.” Very humiliating for the Palestinians. Very humiliating. Today the Arab diplomats and the Arab leaders visit Israel and receive security aid, so the Palestinians can no longer say “the Arab World is behind us.”³⁵

With no horizon of an Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders, Israel proposes to the Palestinians a deal: they should give up their national aspirations, give up their national struggle, stop their resistance to the Israeli presence in the territories—and they will get in return economic welfare, better life conditions, better infrastructures and services, economic and civil cooperation. This is basically Benjamin Netanyahu’s formula of “peace for peace”, or “economic peace”: a gradual process of normalization of the current situation and the development of economic welfare among the Palestinians, while reducing their national aspirations and hopes for independent statehood.

The Israeli strategy of “economic peace” or “shrinking the conflict” at the state level is also observable at the local level in the West Bank. The interviews with Israeli settlers find local initiatives to normalize the Israeli settlements by establishing “economic peace” with the surrounding Palestinian towns and villages. Ayal Fischler, a member of the city Council of Ma’ale Adumim, is a religious Zionist of the Israeli far right, who believes in Greater

Israel. Opposing the idea of any withdrawal from the holy land, promised to the Jewish people, this is his vision of peace with “the Arabs of Judea and Samaria,” as he refers to the West Bank Palestinians:

“In the Ma’ala Adumim industrial zone there are approximately 5,000 Palestinian workers who make a living in dignity compared to the job opportunities on their side. I think this is the horizon. [...] At the end of the day a man needs to bring home an income.”³⁶

Mrs. Alla Weiner, a member of the city council of Ariel, a West Bank settlement, is a secular Israeli of Soviet origin, who is also in favor of public transport in the Jewish holidays and the separation between state and religion.³⁷ Asked about her own vision for peace with the Palestinians, she is quite proud of the fact that there are even young Arab Palestinians who come to study at the Ariel University, the first Israeli university in the West Bank.³⁸ Mrs. Weiner sees this as a sign that economic peace is already starting on the ground. For her, the way forward toward peace is the promotion of a “shared life” and a “living together”, notably through the development of joint economic and civil projects in the West Bank:

“The economic aspect can be a key to the solution. Since once you have economic interests, suddenly people are more flexible and you find a common language.”³⁹

Guy Yifrah, Deputy Mayor of Ma’ale Adumim, West Bank settlement, argues that more and more Palestinians understand that their genuine interest is not in following their current national leaders, with their “unrealistic and ideological slogans and claims,” according to him, but rather in cooperating with Israel, enjoying many benefits such as a relatively high monthly salary, including pensions and benefits.⁴⁰ Yifrah argues that economic welfare is more important to the Palestinians than full equal citizenship.

Israelis further argue that the opposition and resistance do not lead the Palestinians anywhere, quite on the contrary—the Palestinians pay a very expensive price for their refusal to cooperate with Israel. They hold that more and more Arab states, and Arab Palestinians as well, become more “pragmatic” and “realistic” in their relations with Israel, moving on from their initial principled opposition to the state of Israel toward acceptance and cooperation. For instance, a member of the Gush Etzion regional

36 Interview with Ayal Fischler, member of the city Council of Ma’ale Adumim, West Bank settlement, 3 November 2021.

37 Interview with Ala Weiner, member of the city council of Ariel, West Bank settlement, 8 November 2021, Ariel.

38 Citizens of Israel. The teaching at the University of Ariel is in the Hebrew language only. There is no official academic institution in Israel with teaching in Arabic. There is a special bus line directly from Tel-Aviv to the university of Ariel to attract young Israelis to study there.

39 Interview with Ala Weiner, member of city council of Ariel, West Bank settlement, 8 November 2021, Ariel.

40 Interview with Guy Yifrah, Deputy Mayor of Ma’ale Adumim, West Bank settlement, 17 November 2021, Ma’ale Adumim.

33 “Abraham Accords Peace Agreement: Treaty of Peace, Diplomatic Relations and Full Normalization Between the United Arab Emirates and the State of Israel”, signed on 15 September 2020.

34 See, for instance, the joint declaration of 22 December 2022 at Rabat between the United States of America, the Kingdom of Morocco and the State of Israel.

35 Interview with Alon Liel, a former Israeli diplomat, 24 November 2021, Herzliya.

council, West Bank settlement, claims that the silent majority among the Palestinians is only interested in its daily life, not in politics:

“Some of the Arabs became rich thanks to us, became construction managers thanks to us, or simply bring food to the table thanks to us.”⁴¹

In fact, some of the Israeli settlers in the West Bank wish to promote economic and civil projects in partnership with Palestinians, such as an environmentally friendly treatment of sewage of all the inhabitants, both those of the Israeli settlements as the ones of the Palestinian villages around them.⁴² Oded Revivi, Head of the local council of Efrat, a West Bank settlement in the area of Bethlehem, Southern West Bank, even initiated Arabic language courses in the settlements' schools at early age, so the children can better understand their neighbors and will not be afraid of them when they meet them at the supermarket.⁴³ The Israeli West Bank settlers do not believe in any top-down peace initiatives but rather in “bottom-up peace”:

“We need to create as many joint industrial zones as possible [...] When a person has a living, he has something to lose, he enjoys life [...] What is important to most people is not politics but to make a living.”⁴⁴

However, one should be aware of a possible gap between the Israeli settlers “political leaders” official discourse in an interview to an external observer, asking about perspectives for peace with the Palestinians, and their discourse to their supporters and voters in their constituency. For instance, Davidi Ben-Zion, deputy head of the Samaria Regional Council, inhabitant of the Israeli settlement of Elon More, near the Palestinian city of Nablus, told the author in an interview that he would like to promote the building of new roads in the West Bank that will serve the entire population, Israelis and Palestinians alike.⁴⁵ However, the same interviewee also tweeted a few hours before the Huwara rampage of 26 February 2023⁴⁶ that the town “should be wiped out” and that “there’s no room for mercy.”⁴⁷ Israeli settlers interviewed all claim that the West Bank

Palestinians are willing to let go of their national aspirations and dreams in exchange for a better daily life, a “normal life.”⁴⁸

The Palestinian opposition to normalization

On the other hand, West Bank Palestinians oppose the Israeli settlers' grassroots initiatives of bottom-up economic peace. In the process of transforming conflict situations and achieving peace, there is an added value in innovative, bottom-up, and grassroots initiatives of ordinary citizens (Auteserre, 2021). However, Israeli-Palestinian people-to-people peace and co-existence initiatives under the current situation of military occupation, apartheid and unequal rights, are considered by the Palestinians as part of the Israeli efforts of normalization of the current reality.

While the interviewees among Israeli settlers in the West Bank claim that they wish to have more people-to-people exchanges with their Arab Palestinian neighbors, they also acknowledge that this aspiration is not reciprocal. As a result, the current grassroots bottom-up peace and coexistence initiatives between West Bank Israeli settlers and Palestinians are extremely marginal, facing a strong resistance in the Palestinian society.

For instance, a friendly soccer match between children of the settlement of Ariel and children from the neighboring Palestinian town of Salfit was canceled as the Palestinian team refused to take part in it.⁴⁹ Similarly, Mrs. Brenda Horvitz, a feminist Israeli settler and a member of the city council of Maale Adumim, recalls a story that happened to an Israeli friend of hers who met Palestinian women in Ramallah in the framework of a project of empowerment of women in politics, but only got yelled at “for all the bad things that Israel is doing.”⁵⁰ For Horvitz, who is active in empowering Palestinian citizens of Israel in the Negev/Naqab, and is a strong believer in inter-religious peace and dialogue, the Palestinians are stuck in an attitude of permanent resistance:

“They are in a teenager stage, and I do not mean that in a condescending way. I think it’s part of the development [...] Even if that would be better for them economically, better for them socially, better for them in every level, they would still feel they are under occupation. That’s what I think.” (see text footnote 50)

Indeed, West Bank Palestinians oppose normalization with the Israeli settlers, including peace and co-existence activities, considered as a taboo in the Palestinian society. Meetings between Israeli settlers and Palestinians at the local level are often done in secrecy, as the Palestinians are afraid of sanctions in their society or not ready to have these meetings in public.⁵¹ For instance, some

41 Interview with a member of the Gush Etzion regional council, West Bank settlement, 15 November 2021, Jerusalem.

42 Interview with Ayal Fischler, member of the city Council of Ma’ale Adumim, West Bank settlement, 3 November 2021, Ma’ale Adumim.

43 Interview with Oded Ravivi, head of Efrat local council, West Bank settlement, 16 November 2021, Efrat.

44 Interview with Davidi Ben-Zion, member of the Samaria regional council, West Bank settlements, 7 November 2021, Jerusalem.

45 Interview with Davidi Ben-Zion, deputy head of the Samaria regional council, West Bank settlements, 7 November 2021, Jerusalem.

46 On 26 February 2023 approximately 400 Israeli settlers attacked the town of Huwara, in the northern West Bank, as a revenge to the killing of two young Israeli settlers earlier that day by a Palestinian in that town. One Palestinian died and approximately 100 got injured during the rampage, while a dozen of homes and tens of cars were set by fire by the Israeli settlers.

47 Maanit, Chen, “Israeli Legal Experts to AG: Investigate Smotrich for “Inducing War Crimes”, *Haaretz*, 27 February 2023.

48 Interview with Ayal Fischler, member of the city Council of Ma’ale Adumim, West Bank settlement, 3 November 2021, Ma’ale Adumim.

49 Interview with Ala Weiner, a member of city council of Ariel, West Bank settlement, 8 November 2021, Ariel.

50 Interview with Brenda Horvitz, member of city Council of Ma’ale Adumim, West Bank settlement, 7 November 2021, Ma’ale Adumim.

51 Interview with a member of Efrat local council, West Bank settlement, 16 November 2021, Efrat.

Palestinian members of the team of *Shorashim/Judur* (meaning “roots” in Hebrew and in Arabic), a small peace initiative of people-to-people meetings between West Bank settlers and Palestinians, “have chosen to remain anonymous”⁵² and refuse any photos to be taken during the movement’s activities.⁵³

At a broader level, beyond these bottom-up initiatives of peace and normalization in the West Bank between Israeli Settlers and Palestinians, facing the Israeli policy of normalization, “economic peace” and “shrinking the conflict,” the Palestinians’ approach is very much focused on refusing the pressures for acceptance and normalization of the Israeli occupation and apartheid.

The Palestinian interviewees emphasize that the issue is highly political, of a people who aspire liberation from occupation, and not an economic issue of the improvement of life conditions or economic growth under the Israeli occupation. A member of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) from Bethlehem, affiliated with Hamas, agrees:

“Netanyahu came up with the economic solution 10 years ago. There is no economic solution to this political conflict. The issue is not working permits. This is not Singapore. Here there is occupation—an occupying people and a people living under occupation.”⁵⁴

A senior member of the Fatah Youth in Nablus claims:

“The Palestinians do not aspire to the improvement of life conditions in their prison but to liberation [...] the economic peace is sand in the eyes. Our problem is the occupation, not the economy [...] Every solution that does not start with an end to the occupation simply delays the explosion.”⁵⁵

The Palestinians oppose the Israeli policy of economic peace and demand the end of occupation. A Palestinian political leader from Nablus of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), also explains:

“The era of slavery is over. They want slaves. [...] The experience of the 1980s showed that people lived in economic welfare, better than today, and the first Intifada erupted. There is no solution without the end of the occupation. There is no better economic situation with the occupation.”⁵⁶

While the Palestinians aspire the end of the occupation and the fulfillment of their right for self-determination, they also acknowledge that this is not possible today since they are weak, fragmented and isolated. Palestinians are also well aware of the shift to the right wing in the Israeli society in the past 20 years, which

refuses to recognize the Palestinians’ rights and no longer consider the two-state solution.

For the Palestinians, in order to move forward toward a solution, it is first necessary to unite the Palestinian nation and to return to non-violent popular resistance, similar to the first Intifada. In addition, they also argue that an international pressure against Israel is needed, forcing Israel to effectively implement the decisions of the international community, for instance by a powerful movement of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel.⁵⁷

The Palestinians’ ability at the moment to slow down the ongoing process of deepening apartheid is quite limited. Yet, they refuse the normalization of the current situation and they do not seem to give up their national aspirations, their demand for their collective rights, their national identity, their fight for liberation. Considering the huge imbalance of power in favor of Israel, the Palestinians generally also refuse to discuss any alternative to the two-state solution since they perceive any proposed alternative coming from the Israeli side as an attempt to normalize and legitimize the current situation. An elected member of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) from Ramallah, affiliated with Hamas, refuses to discuss any alternative to the creation of an independent Palestinian state: “We will neither do a confederation with the occupation nor an autonomy under the occupation.”⁵⁸

The two-state solution as opposition to annexation and normalization

The Palestinians who advocate for the two-state solution argue that it is not wise to abandon the goal of an independent Palestinian state after so much political capital was invested in it. Nour Odeh, a Palestinian political analyst, explains why she still believes in the fight for Palestinian independent statehood:

‘We are the weaker side in this equation. We do not have the super powerful army, we are not a super power in intelligence and alliances with the EU and the US. What we have done, though, over the past 50 or 60 years, is to accumulate a very important and valuable standing in terms of international law. This is our shield. [...] To give that up? To give up the legal status of the Palestinian people? Of their rights? The international recognition of Palestine as a state, internationally? In return for what? In return for normalizing the existence of settlements which are a war crime in occupied territory? Normalizing the take-over of all of historic Palestine and thus endorsing the Greater Israel project?’⁵⁹

Odeh’s argument is that by recognizing the “one-state reality” the Palestinians basically recognize their defeat after a long struggle

52 www.friendsofroots.net/team (accessed January 31, 2022).

53 The author’s participant observation of a meeting of Roots/Shorashim/Judur, 24 November 2021, Gush Etzion Junction, West Bank.

54 Interview with a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), Hamas affiliated party, Bethlehem.

55 Interview with a senior member of the Fatah Youth, Nablus.

56 Interview with a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Nablus.

57 Interview with Sami Abu Shehadeh, a former member of the Israeli Knesset, leader of “Balad” party, a Palestinian citizen of Israel, 22 November 2021, Jerusalem.

58 Interview with a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), Hamas affiliated, Ramallah.

59 Nour Odeh, Palestinian political analyst, “Israel-Palestine: Can a one-state solution work?”, Al-Jazeera TV channel, 5 May 2022.

for statehood. From a Palestinian perspective, the main issue with the paradigm shift from the “two-state solution” toward a “one state reality” from the river to the sea is the legitimacy it seems to provide, a posteriori, to Israel’s annexation policy of the West Bank and its’ illegal settlement project. The acknowledgment of the “one-state reality” is also risking giving up the fight against the occupation, since one accepts Israel’s annexation as a fact on the ground to be dealt with and taken into account instead of fighting it. This is indeed the argument of Ian S. Lustick call for a paradigm shift, arguing that in the one-state reality the expansion of Israeli settlements has become irrelevant (Lustick, 2022): “Whether Israel builds new neighborhoods or settlements here or there does not matter for future peace negotiations”⁶⁰. However, Michael Manekin, a prominent member of the Israeli “peace camp” against the occupation, argues that it is wrong to give up on the struggle against the on-going occupation and annexation in the West Bank in the name of a possible future alternative:

“The Israeli left gave up the fight against the occupation, seen as irreversible, as a lost case. But the occupation is not over. It is still on-going, today, at this very moment. [...] In the name of the future confederation we legitimize the settlements today, we give up on the struggle against the occupation today [...] It is easier to imagine an alternative future than to deal with the present reality.”⁶¹

The different emerging alternatives to the two-state solution, such as federal (Elazar, 2017) or confederal⁶² peace plans, are indeed pretty and attractive pictures of a better future than today’s reality, and they may give people some hope, but they do not provide a roadmap on how we are going to get there.⁶³ Hugh Lovatt, Senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Affairs (ecfr), also refers to this emerging debate on the irrelevance of the two-state solution, but he does not believe this changes much in practice today:

“I would put the emphasis on the need for equal rights, the fight against apartheid, and fight against occupation, because I think whether you are heading toward two states or one state [...] what will happen tomorrow is not one state or two states. What will happen tomorrow is the same as is happening today and what happened yesterday, and that’s deepening apartheid.”⁶⁴

In the current situation of deepening apartheid and Israeli continued expansion of settlements in the West Bank, discussing and developing in detail alternative peace solutions is taking the risk of giving up on the fight against Israel’s on-going policy,

thus normalizing and accepting Israel’s *de-facto* annexation and apartheid, for some kind of possible alternative future, which is still imaginary only.

The argument is that the emerging debate on the one-state reality and the possible alternatives to the two-state solution does not replace the actual fight against the deepening apartheid (Halper, 2021). The Palestinian refusal even to consider any alternative to the two-state solution, which was agreed upon by the international community, is to be understood in the context of their fight against the occupation and apartheid, as well as their weakness vis-à-vis the Israeli attempts to normalize and to legitimate this situation. From a Palestinian point of view, the current paradigm shift from a two-state solution to a one-state reality represents a risk of losing their national struggle for liberation and independent statehood:

“The quest for an independent Palestinian state has been at the core of the Palestinian national struggle for a very long time. [...] There is a need to rethink the Palestinian state project, given the territorial impossibility of a Palestinian state [...] Moving away from the pursuit of territorial sovereignty as a means to achieve political liberation. [...] The quest for a Palestinian state was not in vain, but its historical role has come to an end (Farsakh, 2021, p. 2).”

At this point in time, both sides in this conflict have already made tremendous investments of all kind of resources in their current national project of a nation-state to call their own. However, as the two-state solution seems no longer feasible, both sides now are starting to rethink the goals of their national projects of a classical nation-state of an “exclusive sovereignty model” (Elazar, 1979, p. 2). In both societies there are emerging calls on the need to develop an alternative political horizon of a shared land. While these calls are still timid and marginal, they are nevertheless emerging and worth exploring.

What are the Palestinian and Israeli visions and ideas of a shared land? There is a need to “re-establish a political horizon”⁶⁵ for Israel-Palestine. Exploring a future political horizon is not merely an academic or intellectual question on the “best possible solution”—two states or one. The reality is that Israelis and Palestinians already live in one territory. The population of two national groups is mixed in one territorial unit, between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean sea. The challenge is to identify a feasible alternative direction that may be acceptable for both Israelis and Palestinians, that will enable them to live as equal citizens, ensuring self-determination and collective rights for both national groups.

Articulating this new vision requires a shift from the Oslo paradigm of partition of the land and separation between the two ethnic groups toward a new paradigm of power-sharing, partnership and equality between both peoples, ensuring the rights of both national groups. Acknowledging the dead-end of the old paradigm of separation, Israelis, Palestinians and their partners in the international community could shift their attention and efforts toward a new direction, a new political horizon. There is a need

60 There, p. 109.

61 Interview with Michael Manekin, a prominent member of the Israeli “peace camp”, 2nd February 2022, Jerusalem.

62 Dahlia Scheindlin, “The Confederation Alternative for Israel and Palestine”, *Century Foundation*, February 3, 2020.

63 Ian S. Lustick, lecture at Sapir College, Israel, 25 May 2022, by zoom.

64 Interview with Hugh Lovatt, European Council on Foreign Relations (ecfr), 11 November 2021, by zoom.

65 Council of the EU’s conclusions on the Middle East Peace Process of 18 January 2016.

for a new post-Oslo paradigm, a forward-looking vision toward equality in a single democratic state:

“It will also do much to positively shift dynamics on the ground if it becomes apparent that it is already too late to sustain a viable and sovereign Palestinian state. Such a situation would require the two parties to work out how they can live with each other as equals, preparing for a just one-state solution.”⁶⁶

This paradigm shift from partition to partnership allows us to fix a new political horizon and to set out concrete steps and a roadmap toward it. Debating in detail the exact design of this future shared polity is premature. For the moment, the specific models for shared governance are less important than the general direction. While it is too early to address the exact institutional design of this shared future, drawing up an alternative political horizon to the two-state solution is nevertheless important since it gives a certain direction.

The one-state option

When looking more specifically into a one-state option, a civic model for Israel-Palestine, based on equal citizenship, a democratic and secular state, ignores the existence of two national groups and their aspirations, as well as decades of ethnic conflict and sacrifice. After decades of national conflict, mistrust and bloodshed, a completely ethnic-blind system of governance may not suffice here. In view of the current reality in Israel-Palestine it is difficult to imagine a liberal and secular democratic state simply based on majority rule and the democratic principle of “one person—one vote.”

Such an ethnic-blind secular liberal state entails that the “demographic threat”—the fear strongly felt by the Israeli population that the Palestinians will outnumber them and they will lose the “Jewish majority”—is not dealt with. The Jewish Israelis are very much attached to the very basic Zionist idea of a “Jewish and democratic State”, meaning a democratic state, but with a stable Jewish majority. Moreover, Israel’s fundamental “basic-law: Israel—the Nation-State of the Jewish People” of 2018 entrenches in semi-constitutional legislation that the state of Israel’s aim is to serve its Jewish population, and it is not a state “of all its citizens.” The law stipulates that “the realization of the right to national self-determination in the state of Israel is exclusive to the Jewish people.”⁶⁷

For Jewish Israelis, the idea of a single democratic state with equal rights to all its citizens is not an option at all since this will compromise the Jewish character of the state. Such a state could not guarantee a Jewish majority, or it will compromise its democratic principles, as such a Jewish state cannot be based on

equality.⁶⁸ A one-state option based on equality and partnership is inconceivable today for the Jewish Israelis. Yoav Sorek, the editor of the right-wing journal, Hashiloah, based in Jerusalem, who lives in the settlement of Ofra in the West Bank, answers my question on the possibility to share the land with the Palestinians in this way: “Everything that was invested here was not invested to establish a bi-national state.”⁶⁹ Obviously, the Israeli plan was not a bi-national state, living in equality with the Palestinians, but a Jewish, Zionist state. One may nevertheless wonder to what extent do unintended consequences dominate the best laid plans.

Thus, considering the intense power of national affiliation in this deeply divided society, “[...] any future arrangement must take into account the national self-identification of the two groups, with the possibility of distributing control and resources on that basis” (Ghanem and Bavly, 2015, p. 152). Arguably, power sharing arrangements can provide a solution for protracted ethnic conflicts (Berg and Ben-Porat, 2008).

A one-state model for Israel-Palestine seems to be largely understood today as bi-national in character, with fixed rules of power-sharing arrangements and collective representation between the two national groups, strong mutual guarantees which would ensure both Arab and Jewish collective interests (Tilley, 2005). Prof. As’ad Ghanem of the University of Haifa, a Palestinian citizen of Israel, proposes a model of non-territorial self-determination, with the full acknowledgment of the needs of the two national groups (Ghanem and Bavly, 2015). Similarly, Sami Abu Shehadeh, also a Palestinian citizen of Israel, the chair of the Balad party and a former Member of the Israeli Knesset, is also in favor of a bi-national option:

“We can make a democratic constitution, with equality for everyone, that respects the right for self-determination of the Jewish nation which was established here. I say, they deserve it. They have built a national group. It was against my will, it was colonialism, and everything. It doesn’t matter—they exist here as a national group and I acknowledge their right for self-determination.”⁷⁰

As we can see from Abu Shehadeh’s words, the Palestinians acknowledge the collective rights of the Israelis on the land of historic Palestine, not for historical reasons but rather out of pragmatism, acknowledging the reality. The West Bank Palestinian lawyer Jonathan Kuttub, a co-founder of the human rights organization Al-Haq, also advocates for a bi-national vision of a shared state (Kuttub, 2020).⁷¹ This bi-national formula accommodates the needs of both national groups and includes

68 Pnina Sharvit Baruch, “Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Viability of One-State Models”, in *The Institute for National Security Studies* (INSS), Tel-Aviv University, Memorandum no. 217, December 2021.

69 Interview with Yoav Sorek, Israeli settler and journalist, 10 November 2021, Jerusalem.

70 Interview with Sami Abu Shehadeh, a former member of the Israeli Knesset, leader of “Balad” party, a Palestinian citizen of Israel, 22 November 2021, Jerusalem.

71 Kuttub proposes power-sharing arrangements which include, for instance, a bi-national constitutional court, while in other significant ministries and public bodies quotas must dictate the minimum number of

66 Hugh Lovatt, “The end of Oslo: A new European Strategy on Israel-Palestine, European Council on Foreign Relations (ecfr)” Policy Brief, December 2020.

67 English official is available online at <https://m.knesset.gov.il/EN/activity/documents/BasicLawsPDF/BasicLawNationState.pdf> (accessed April 1, 2023).

institutional power-sharing arrangements that cannot be modified by numerical majorities.

The main problem with the bi-national model for Israel-Palestine is that it entrenches and fixes the two groups: all citizens have to belong to one of them, preventing the creation of a new common identity of the new state (Masri, 2021). In addition to entrenching both two groups in their current identity, one should keep in mind that there are also non-binary identities in Israel-Palestine, individuals who are neither Jews nor Arabs. This is a real problem in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, where citizens who do not belong to either of the three ethnic groups which are officially recognized in the constitution are considered under the vague category of “others”, and hence suffer from ethnic discrimination.⁷²

The confederal option

The emerging idea of an Israeli-Palestinian confederation is dealing with the roots of the conflict in 1948 while rejecting the Oslo paradigm of separation, introducing the notion of a shared homeland and a partnership based peace. For instance, an Israeli-Palestinian peace initiative, launched in 2012, A Land for All, proposes that the Land of Israel/historic Palestine should remain one territorial unit, the homeland for both Jewish Israelis and for Palestinians, but as a confederation of two states along the 1967 borders.⁷³ This initiative is therefore part of the current paradigm shift from separation between the two peoples toward a framework of partnership:

“Both peoples have a profound connection to this land or parts of it. Whether they call it *Eretz Yisrael* (Israel), or Palestine, and both consider it their homeland. Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians live side by side, sometimes intermingled, throughout this land. [...] No international borders could sever Palestinians” ties to Jaffa, Haifa or Lod any more than they could sever Jewish ties to Hebron, Nablus or Bethlehem [...] The Israeli Palestinian conflict was not born in 1967. Its roots go back to 1948, and even earlier. To advance toward settling the conflict, these roots must be addressed.”⁷⁴

On the same vein, The Holy Land Confederation⁷⁵, a peace proposal put forward in 2022 by former Israeli minister Dr. Yossi

representatives at the highest levels. In government ministries, the deputy of every ministry must belong to the other major group.

72 See “European Court of Human Rights” Grand Chamber ruling in the case of *Sejdic and Finci v. Bosnia and Herzegovina* of 22 December 2009. The court ruled that the inability of a Roma and a Jew to stand for election to presidency, the highest political office in the country, is a violation of article 14 of the European Convention of Human Rights, prohibition of discrimination.

73 “From Conflict to Reconciliation: A new vision for Palestinian-Israeli peace. Draft for discussion”. *A Land for All*, 2021.

74 Ibid.

75 “The Holy Land Confederation as a Facilitator for the Two-State Solution”. Available online at: <https://www.monmouth.edu/news/documents/the-holy-land-confederation-as-a-facilitator-for-the-two-state-solution-english.pdf/> (accessed May 16, 2022).

Beilin, one of the architects of the Oslo accords, and Dr. Hiba Husseini, former legal advisor to the Palestinian Oslo peace process delegation, also refers to both people’s strong attachment to the entire territorial unit of historic Palestine/Land of Israel, and to the need of cohabitation and partnership rather than separation.

However, besides the discourse on the need to acknowledge the roots of the conflict in 1948 and its contribution to shifting the paradigm from separation to partnership, the confederal idea is still a variation of the two-state solution—the creation of two sovereign states alongside the 1967 borders.⁷⁶ But the main issue with these federal or confederal initiatives is that they are not accompanied by an effective fight against the current situation of apartheid while they already legitimize the Israeli settlements in the West Bank. According to the confederal idea, Israelis have the right to live anywhere in the shared homeland, hence also in the West Bank. Without accompanying this innovative idea with a genuine struggle for equal rights between these Israeli settlers and the Palestinian population, this idea may actually contribute to the legitimacy of the Israeli annexation of the West Bank.

As the Palestinians perceive the two-state solution as a legal and a diplomatic powerful tool that they have at their disposal against the Israeli occupation, annexation and apartheid, they generally refuse to reconsider this formula and consider alternatives, a debate which is seen as giving up their long fight for independent statehood. The findings indicate that there is nevertheless a meaningful group of Palestinians who see its’ future not in an independent Palestinian nation-state but in living together with the Jewish Israelis, in equality.

The Palestinians in Israel

In fact, Arab Palestinians already live together with Jewish Israelis since 1948. At the end of the war of 1947–1948, around 160,000 Arab Palestinians remained in their homeland, in the territory that became the state of Israel. This population obtained Israeli citizenship, but was put under strict military rule until 1966. Today they are more than 1.6 million people, representing approximately 17% of Israel’s citizenry.⁷⁷ This particular community is a significant national indigenous minority, the original inhabitants of the country. However, they have no official international recognition or any legal guarantee for their collective rights as such.

76 Interview with Meron Rapaport, co-founder of “A Land for All” peace initiative, Tel-Aviv, 17 November 2021. These two sovereign states will establish joint institutions, a shared superstructure, and have an open border between them.

77 “Statistical Report on Arab Society in Israel 2021”, Nasreen Haddad Haj-Yahya, Muhammed Khalaily and Arik Rudnitzky, Israel Democracy Institute and the Authority for the Economic Development of the Minorities Sector, Ministry of Social Equality. The official Israeli statistics include the Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem, annexed by Israel in 1981, who do not have Israeli citizenship. If we include the 362,000 East-Jerusalem Palestinians, we reach a total of almost 2 million Arab Palestinians, or 21.1% of Israel’s total population, according to the Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics, updated 31 December 2021.

The Palestinian choice of the two-state solution in the 1980s, analyzed earlier in this article, focusing their fight for an independent statehood in the territories occupied by Israel since 1967, hence renouncing the project of liberation of the entire Palestine, sent a clear message to the “Arabs of 1948” that their political path is different than the rest of their brothers and sisters beyond the Green Line (Nassar, 2021). In other words, the Palestinians in Israel were not part of the Oslo Accords of 1993 and were completely ignored by the Middle East Peace Process.

As a result, the 1990s saw the emergence of a few civil society organizations among the Palestinians in Israel, advocating for civil equality within Israel, unrelated to the situation of the rest of the Palestinian people. Also after the collapse of the Oslo process, the Palestinian political leadership in Israel still articulated its vision as a national minority within Israel. In 2006 and 2007, this group launched an important public debate on how they see their future in Israel, known as the “vision documents.”⁷⁸ In sum, these documents express a demand for collective rights of the Palestinian Arabs of Israel as a national minority, equal power-sharing at the state-level, based on the model of consensual democracy, as well as cultural autonomy.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, despite their particular situation and their demand for equal rights in Israel, the Palestinians in Israel show again and again their unity with the rest of the Palestinian people. Notably, in October 2000, in the 1st days of the second Intifada, Palestinians in Israel went to the streets as well: 13 demonstrators were killed by the Israeli police, notably in the Galilee area.⁸⁰ Some 20 years later, the “May Events” of May 2021 also showed to what extent the Palestinians in Israel are part of the Palestinian people as a whole. The demonstrations that broke out in Sheik Jarrah and the Al-Aqsa Mosque in East Jerusalem expanded rapidly not only to the rest of the West Bank and Gaza but also inside Israel itself, with widespread demonstrations of solidarity, riots, and inter-ethnic violent clashes between Israeli Jews and Arab Palestinians, in particular in Israel’s mixed cities like Lod/Al-Lydd and Acre. A very important moment in the collective history of the Palestinians in Israel was the “Land Day” of 30 of March 1976, when Israeli police forces killed six during the demonstrations against land confiscation in the Galilee area.⁸¹

78 See “The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel”, National Committee for the Heads of the Arab Local Authorities in Israel, 2006; See “the Democratic Constitution”, Adalah, 2007; and “The Haifa Declaration”, Mada al-Carmel, 2007.

79 The vision documents may be a good starting point to examine an alternative future for Israel-Palestine as a whole, articulating an alternative to the current unequal one-state reality.

80 Following the “October 2000 events” the Israeli government nominated a “National Commission of Inquiry into the Clashes Between the Security Forces and Israeli Citizens on October 2000”, headed by Justice Theodore Or, known as “The Or Commission”.

81 More recently, the killing of Shireen Abu Akleh, al-Jazeera senior journalist, in the Jenin refugee camp in May 2022 also illustrated how united the Palestinian people are across the territory of Israel-Palestine, as spontaneous reactions of choc, mourning and anger over her killing were expressed not only in the West Bank and Gaza but also among Palestinian citizens of Israel.

Palestinian citizens of Israel among the interviewees of this study see the similarities between the Israeli policies in the West Bank and toward their own communities. Prof. As’ad Ghanem, political scientist at the University of Haifa stated that “what Israel did in Karmi’el [Jewish city in the Galilee in Israel] is similar to what it did in Ariel [West Bank settlement]. It is the same thing—a process of Jewish expansion.”⁸² Fida Shehadeh, a Palestinian member of the city council of Lod/ Al-Lydd, a mixed city in Israel, shares her own experience in both sides of the 1967 borders:

“I worked for “*Bimkom*”⁸³ in Area C of the West Bank, in the Southern hills of Hebron [...] then I moved back to Lod/Al-Lydd [a mixed city in Israel]. I do not feel a difference between what I saw in Area C and what I see here. Maybe there the daily life is more difficult. There is no electricity. There is no water. Their houses are being demolished all the time [...] But here there is a continuous threat of home demolitions [...] we do not have electricity neither, we do not have water. Same thing.”⁸⁴

While 90% of the Palestinians in Israel live in segregated communities, separated from the Jewish population, approximately 10% of them live in mixed cities in Israel. The six historical cities are Haifa, Tel-Aviv-Jaffa, Acre, Lod/Al-Lydd, Ramla/Ramleh, and Ma’alot-Tarshiha.⁸⁵ In view of the housing crisis among the Palestinians in Israel, more and more local authorities become mixed as Palestinian citizens of Israel move from their overcrowded towns to live in relatively new cities in their vicinity such as Karmi’el, Afula and Nof Hagalil⁸⁶ in the Galilee area in Northern Israel.⁸⁷ These previously Jewish-only cities, which are today in the process of becoming more and more mixed, with a growing Palestinian minority, are especially interesting laboratories for developing a new model of a shared society in Israel-Palestine in which Jews and Arabs are not separated but live together in equality. The Palestinians in Israel interviewed in this study suggest that these mixed cities can be used to develop a model of a shared, bi-national city, “in order to open some kind of a political horizon that this could work.”⁸⁸ For them, the success of such a model could project on the entire land: “If the mixed local authorities here will become more equal, and

82 Interview with Prof. As’ad Ghanem, political scientist at the University of Haifa and a Palestinian citizen of Israel, 18 November 2021, Haifa.

83 “Bimkom—Planners for Planning Rights” is an Israeli human rights organization working in the field of spatial planning and housing policies notably in the West Bank.

84 Interview with Fida Shehadeh, a member of city council of Lod/Al-Lydd, Israel, 24 January 2022, Lod/Al-Lydd.

85 Jerusalem is not considered a “mixed city” since the Palestinian population there are not Israeli citizens.

86 Nof Hagalil was established by Israel just next to Nazareth. Today, approximately 30% of its residents are Palestinians (according to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, updated 31 December 2021).

87 Interview with Ruth Lewin Chen, Director of the Shared Cities Project in the Abraham Initiatives, 7 February 2022, by zoom.

88 Interview with Sami Abu Shehadeh, member of the Israeli Knesset, Palestinian citizen of Israel, 22 November 2021, Jerusalem.

the situation will improve between the two populations, this will influence at the national level.”⁸⁹ Considered as microcosms and real-life laboratories for experiments, Israel’s mixed cities “have the potential to be a model for the Jewish-Arab relations all over the state of Israel.”⁹⁰

Discussion

We have analyzed Israel’s policy of annexation of the West Bank, both *de facto* and *de jure*, that makes the two-state solution more and more irrelevant in practice. This policy of annexation is combined with attempts of normalization of the emerging one-state reality, both at the international level as well as on the ground, in the West Bank. Against Israel’s policies of annexation and normalization, or economic peace, the Palestinian approach is a principled opposition to normalization of the current one-state reality.

In this context, the Palestinians perceive the two-state solution as the best tool they have to call for an end to the Israeli occupation, in particular since this solution has a broad consensus in the international community and is based on UN resolutions and international law. The Palestinians see the idea to consider alternatives to the two-state solution with great suspicion and mistrust. They see the opening up of this formula as a risk of a possible normalization of the Israel’s annexation. Israel is setting new facts on the ground in the West Bank under its control, and then trying to impose or suggest political solutions which take into account and normalize these new facts, the policy of *faits accomplis*.

To sum up, the mainstream Israeli vision for the future is defeating the Palestinian national movement, weakening the Palestinian national identity and aspirations:

“As long as there are here two national movements who claim the same territory as the fulfillment of their national right of self-determination, there is no solution. [...] The Arabs can find their identity either in other Arab nation-states or within the cultural and religious space, and not as a national identity. Then the whole business is much more solvable, and not a zero-sum game.”⁹¹

Yet, considering the history of the conflict and the two different visions for the future, also reflected in the interviews of this study, this “zero-sum game” is bound to continue in the years to come. There is no indication that the Palestinian people are about to give up their national identity and accept

Israel’s economic peace and live under a system of apartheid. The Palestinian interviewees often repeated that the Palestinian people is in a long struggle that will still require time and patience:

“The Palestinians should stand strong on their land, transmit to the next generations the Palestinian heritage that this is Palestinian land, until reaching a solution. The strong will not remain strong forever and the weak will not remain weak forever.”⁹²

Similarly, there is no indication that the Israeli society is shifting toward accepting the Palestinian collective rights. Quite the contrary: Netanyahu’s far-right government’s first guideline is “The Jewish people have an exclusive and unquestionable right to all areas of the Land of Israel.” Yet, the one-state reality from the river to the sea is bi-national in nature, with two national groups in one territory. Without any dramatic development such as a forced transfer of the Arab Palestinian population, similar in scope to the events of the *Nakba* of 1947–1948, the territorial space of Israel-Palestine will remain bi-national. For the moment, alternative peace solutions, based on partnership and equality between both national groups, such as a one-state option or a confederation, seem like a utopian distant future. Israel’s mixed cities seem to be the spaces in which this utopian vision may be developed concretely. There is therefore a need to explore further and more in depth these mixed spaces—the municipal policies as well as bottom-up practices in civil society. The development of possible “bi-national counter-realities” (Gazit and Latham, 2014) in Israel’s mixed cities may serve as the basis for further transformation at the national level across the territory of Israel-Palestine. Similar dynamics have been observed in Northern Ireland with the emergence of power-sharing practices at the local level (Cox, 1996).

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study involving human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent to participate in this study was not required from the participants in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements. Written informed consent for the publication of identifiable data was provided by the relevant participants where names and other identifying information have been included.

⁹² Interview with a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), Hamas affiliated, Ramallah.

⁸⁹ Interview with Fida Shehadeh, a member of city council of Lod/Al-Lydd, Israel, 24 January 2022, Lod/Al-Lydd.

⁹⁰ Interview with Ruth Lewin Chen, Director of the Shared Cities Project in the Abraham Initiatives, 7 February 2022, by zoom.

⁹¹ Interview with Yoav Sorek, an Israeli settler and journalist, 10 November 2021, Jerusalem.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Funding

I have received funding from the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation—Israel office to finance the research.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung—Israel Office for the financial report for conducting this research.

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Conflict of interest

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