Contradictions of the "Two-State Solution"

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The question posed by this Forum has elicited a series of rich and thought-provoking responses. What I propose to do is work through these responses as a means of making an argument, not that the "two-state solution" is not possible but that this necessary and inevitable outcome is so fraught with contradictions that it is questionable whether it can be considered a "solution," that is, a stable territorial order that will provide a basis for state building, economic development, and peace for Palestinians and Israelis. In doing so I will also note the dangers of the "grammar of geopolitics," the rhetoric that leads us to use abstractions like "Israel" and "Palestine" as if they referred to singular actors and homogeneous entities.

Let me begin with historical reasoning and analogies, which are stimulatingly explored by Rafael Reuveny. The Israeli/Palestinian question is indeed a colonial one, but it has unique characteristics. Israeli state formation after 1948 was largely a modernist colonial project yet also shaped by a counter-modern religious vision. Post-1967 Israel was also a colonial project but in a different way, with a messianic Zionism coming to the fore after 1977 (helpfully discussed in Izhak Schnell's essay). Both colonial visions have a common aversion to giving up land or sharing space. The two have long been allied politically, but they are not the same; one is secular Euro-modernism (making "deserts bloom"), whereas the other is a religious counter-modernism (securing "God's gift to the Jewish people"). Reuveny's analysis speaks of "metropole/colony" and "Israeli colonialism," but the former analogy does not work well (the "metropole" and "colony" are contiguous, after all), and the latter concept disguises the battle *within* Israeli colonial ideologies. I am uncertain what he means when he writes that "Israeli metropolitan fatigue has already led to almost full decolonization." While some may point to the Gaza withdrawal as an example, the redeployment of Israeli forces outside the occupied territory is not "full decolonization." It is part of the renegotiation of the political alliance between the two historically co-dependent forms of Israeli colonialism.

Ali Jarbawi sees a clear calculation behind the Gaza withdrawal: "Priority was given to the goal of maintaining a 'pure race' rather than that of retaining all the occupied land." His analysis is cogent, but the essentialist description of Israel as racist detracts from it not only because the hegemonic discourse is one of "peoples," not "races," but also because there are many counter-hegemonic discourses that are part of Israel's complexity too. Jarbawi is surely correct that Ariel Sharon's strategy was "to impose Israeli conditions" for the establishment of any Palestinian entity. This brings us to the first contradiction of the "two-state solution": if one state can so dictate the terms of the other's establishment, the process becomes merely a codification of a power asymmetry between them and not anything that can be dubbed a "solution" (as defined above). Of course, the key question is what kind of Palestinian state will be allowed to declare itself sovereign by the ruling coalition in Israel and by the powerful members of the international community. Jarbawi is clear that it will be a "rump state," dense with Palestinians that Israel does not want to annex. While that may be the case, his reasoning on the Palestinian option in response—dismantling

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the Palestinian Authority—is puzzling. "The Israeli occupation would thus be exposed once again … Israel's true nature as a racist state would be exposed." Besides needlessly homogenizing, this is idealistic thinking—exposed to whom, and for what benefit? There may be other reasons to dismantle the PA—endemic corruption and the desirability of a fresh start—but doing so to prolong the occupation and deepen the misery in the hope of getting a better deal is not one of them. Jarbawi's dark but plausible conclusion points to a second contradiction of the "two-state solution": It is an asymmetrical outcome structured by the unviability of the Palestinian entity.

Yezid Sayigh's article illustrates how Sharon's strategy outflanked the "road map" and dovetails with Jarbawi's conclusion on how Jordan will be drawn back into West Bank governance if the PA collapses. He still sees a window of opportunity for a "two-state solution" but assumes it could be a solution while asking for the nearly impossible: serious political will from the United States and the European Union to guide the process. Oren Yiftachel's contribution underscores how Zionism is "unable to deal seriously with the core issues of the conflict." Withdrawal is not decolonization. Yiftachel argues persuasively that Zionism as an ethnocratic project "does not necessarily entail territorial expansion." Rather, we have Bantustanization, the creation of "autonomous Palestinian enclaves decorated by state symbols but with little genuine sovereignty free of Israeli control." Instead of a retreat from colonialism, we have the consolidation of an oppressive apartheid territorial order, a Swiss-cheese Palestine in the West Bank perforated by ethnic roads, and a gulag Gaza surrounded on all sides (except the south), perforated regularly with missiles and raids, the wanton violence keeping the conflict raw and polarization pervasive. For Yiftachel, the "two-state solution" is part of "the illusion of impending peace," while the logistics of creeping apartheid strangle any possibility of a viable Palestinian state. This argument, to me at least, is deeply persuasive, though I am unconvinced it is as hidden and undeclared as he implies. Unanswered in this analysis is the question of where the contradictions within Zionism will lead. Have they produced a new dynamic that could further territorial withdrawals and produce something meaningful for Palestinian lives, even if it is sovereignty on life support? Or is it "Gaza first and Gaza last"?

Fouad Moughrabi answers this question. The current dynamic "involves a process of decolonization designed to strengthen and legitimate the process of colonization of the West Bank." The current chaos in Gaza and talk of a Palestinian civil war will trigger greater Egyptian involvement there, while Jordan will re-engage with the Palestinian population centres in the West Bank. This scenario could be called the "extended and enfeebled states solution," with an extended Israel annexing large Jewish settlements in the West Bank as well as the Jordan rift valley, in the name of "defensible borders," and surrounded Palestinian population centres having an enfeebled sovereignty shored up by Egypt, Jordan, and the international community. Moughrabi's arguments chime with those of Yiftachel and point to another contradiction: that the "two-state solution" as a realistic possibility has passed at the very time it is being most discussed.

Naseer Aruri's valuable contribution documents how this came to pass. Aruri argues that George W. Bush's statements accepting Israeli settlements in the West Bank "have rendered his vision of a sovereign, contiguous Palestinian state a mere rhetorical exercise." The Oslo process, rather than ushering in a "two-state solution," furthered the demise of meaningful Palestinian statehood. Palestinians are so fragmented into "sub-communities" that any Palestinian state would be a patchwork of enclaves. Any realized "two-state solution" will be a system that will "fracture under its own built-in contradictions." This much is persuasive, but what follows is a fantasy of repair by a benign

liberal world order that will tear down walls and finally realize a rational liberal order in Israel/Palestine.

Virginia Tilley's essay does not debunk this vision of a benign liberal world order. Indeed, her discussion suggests that civic nationalism is a hegemonic international norm and that the case of Israel/Palestine is an interesting exception to the operation of this norm. Given the manifest unviability of a "two-state solution" (for Tilley accepts the convincing arguments above), the international community must clearly endorse Jewish ethnocracy or shift to a one-state diplomatic agenda. It is a pity that the term "international community" is not disaggregated in Tilley's analysis—she focuses on UN resolutions—but then, doing so would complicate the argument enormously. Her analysis is compelling, but her qualifications are also important: "the switch to civic nationalism has, of course, been far from total." Indeed. What she does not note, but knows, is how the discourse of security has provided an alibi for ethnocracy. Has the Wall of Separation really drawn "universal opprobrium"? One may hope so, but Bush describes its political architect as a "man of peace." The U.S. Letter of Assurance from Bush to Sharon accepts that any final agreement will not require an Israeli withdrawal to 1967 lines, not only because of the large settlement blocs in the West Bank but also because Israel has a right to "defensible borders" (which militarist Zionists interpret as meaning that Israel can retain control over the Jordan riverbed and the eastern slopes of the West Bank hill ridge). I don't think the international community is quite where she describes it. "Realist" norms are still as strong as "liberal" norms, overwhelming power is deferred to in the name of "pragmatism," while historic guilt is what cripples the European Union. Asked what "carrots and sticks" he had for Israel at his diplomatic disposal in January 2005 in Jerusalem, the EU Head of Delegation, Ramiro Cibrian, declared that he "only had carrots."

Izhak Schnell's contribution is valuable as a portrait of the political dynamics within Israeli politics and the geostrategic considerations behind's Sharon's change of tactics in order to confront the "demographic threat." But I doubt that what he describes as "the decline of territorial considerations in the national security strategy" of Israel means that the Israeli army is ready to concede the Jordan rift valley to a Palestinian entity. Both Schnell's and David Newman's contributions are salutary reminders of political realities in Israel that cannot be ignored. A one-state solution is a non-starter, now and into the foreseeable future. As Newman writes, the "intense mutual animosity, hatred, mistrust, and fear felt by each for the other will not allow any form of single binational entity to be created." Rather than recording these as mere political realities, however, Newman could also have noted that there are groups that *want* the perpetual conflict, whose whole world view is of a primordial Darwinian struggle between two peoples in which no solution is possible: one triumphs, the other loses. It can be argued that this was Sharon's world view, and his obsessive desire to crush Yasir Arafat reflected this. Newman is surely right about the great challenge that faces any Israeli government contemplating dismantling settlements in the West Bank. This will be a potential Zionist civil war, and it requires secular Zionists to grasp that the greatest threat to their future security comes from their fellow citizen messianic Zionists. This may be too much to ask. Will secular Fatah members have to face the same issue with Hamas if an enfeebled Palestine of enclaves is realized? In case of the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1921, the result was a civil war between those who took the deal on offer—a partitioned island—and those who held out for the whole island, despite the active resistance of Unionists concentrated in Northern Ireland.

Sharif Elmusa's essay offers some reassurance on this front. Palestinians "constitute a fairly homogenous nation." Elmusa offers

the most evocative descriptions of enclave Palestine: "isolated islands, Bantustans, cages" caught in "a fishnet of Jewish settlements, bypass roads, checkpoints, and military patrols—walled in and walled out." Israel, he argues, "has never accepted the idea of a viable, sovereign Palestinian state." This is the self-made dilemma the Israeli state finds itself in. Pursuing a maximalist strategy for so long, it has precluded the possibility of a viable Palestinian state, yet, in order to prevent a one-state reality by default with a future Palestinian majority, it suddenly needs the fiction of a "viable Palestinian state" to save its ethnocracy. Even if it manages that feat, Elmusa argues, this would not resolve "the Palestinian question," because Palestinians will remain in Israel and Jordan. His "solution," a "Greater Palestine," may have a certain economic logic to it, but politically it is a non-starter. A more "realistic" utopia is, in 50 years, Israel, Palestine, and Jordan preparing their applications for membership in the European Union and, under the prevailing version of the Copenhagen criteria at that time, having to solve their mutual border disputes, liberalize their borders to facilitate commerce and trade, revise their history books, place all their historic monuments under EU heritage management, and allow free movement of peoples in the region. One can always dream, but with weapons of mass destruction loose in the world, and Iran finally acquiring a nuclear weapon, there is a dystopia for every utopia we can imagine in this region.