

# THE CASE FOR A MIDDLE EAST UNION TO ADDRESS THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

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Regional approaches -- sometimes called the no-state solution -- to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are not new. For example, in the mid-1950s the Eisenhower Administration proposed a regional water management union to address the water issues of Israel and Jordan, although Syria and Egypt were also involved in his administration's failed initiative.

Recently, two Israeli academic activists, geographer Oren Yiftachel and anthropologist Jeff Halper, founder of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, have also proposed a Middle East union achieved via a two state solution as a transitional stage.

The case for the regional solution is based on the following issues:

## A. Practical Barriers

- 1) Israeli Settlements: The most popular solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the two state solution, is highly problematic because of Israeli settlements and towns built on what would become the Palestinian state. Other barriers to the two state solution include Israeli resistance for an unhindered transportation link between the West Bank and Gaza, as well as the northern and southern halves of the West Bank. Other barriers include Israeli demands that the "state" be demilitarized and not have control over its air space or underground space, as well as the inflow and outflow of commerce and people. For these reasons many critics have argued that the Palestinian state would be similar to a South African Bantustan or an American Indian reservation.

- 2) Economic and Political Inequality: A further issue left unaddressed by the two state solution is economic and political inequality, which is already extensive and would not be changed through the creation of a Palestinian state aside Israel. On the Israeli side of the border is a state with the greatest amount of internal inequality of industrialized country. On the Palestinian side, in the West Bank and Gaza, the juxtaposition of private villas and new apartment blocks next to refugee camps would continue. Likewise, the rule of business elites, in the case of the West Bank, and religious and economic elites in Gaza would continue, with each Palestinian entity mimicking Israel's repressive apparatus and death squads, but with even more powerful police agencies than they have at present under occupation. Also, in the two states, Palestinians would most likely begin commuting or even migrating to Israel for jobs because its economy is 20 times larger than Palestine's. This process would reproduce the current patterns of exploitation and economic inequality as expressed through in low and unequal wages and benefits, labor flows, unemployment, and outside investments.
- 3) Outside Powers: Likewise, the economic and political influence of outside powers would continue with a two-state solution. The U.S. already dominates the political life of Israel and the West Bank, with extensive sharing, training, and support for their respective militaries, police, and spy agencies. While Gaza's situation is different, it is still influenced by outside powers. Its primary benefactors have been wealthy business and religious figures from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. Even though Hamas is opposed by the United States, its supporters are aligned with the United States, which keeps them in power in the region. As for Iran, it is a new and modest player in Gaza despite press coverage to the contrary. For example, the Grad rockets it supplies to Hamas via caravans, smugglers, and intermediary arms dealers are of ancient design, having been developed by the Soviet Union to fight the Nazis in World War

II. It was then called a Katusha rocket and was fired as part of fusillade, not a single shot.

- 4) Internal Resistance from Nationalists: In contrast to the two state solution, the one unitary state solution usually takes several forms, such as a binational state; a federated, canton-style state; or a secular democratic state. While laudable and also promoted by such now defunct groups as Martin Buber's Brit Shalom (Covenant of Peace), the various versions of the one state are problematic because of extraordinary resistance from nationalists on both sides. At this point, then, it is largely an academic proposal, often by those who can see the unitary apartheid state now under construction and who contend that it makes more sense to coax it into a single state than to let it flame out in a blood bath when U.S. power and resources throughout the Middle East decline to the point that it can no longer prop up the Israeli occupation.

## **B. Theoretical and Historical Issues**

Beyond these various "pragmatic" barriers to the two state solution, there are a number of other issues to be considered when comparing the two state, one state, and no state solutions:

- 1) New, synthetic states: All of the existing and proposed states of the Middle East – with Egypt possibly a separate case – are relatively new and an outcome of WWI in which Britain and France conquered, dismembered, and re-packaged the Ottoman empire along divisive colonial boundaries. While the Ottoman Empire had essentially been a functioning but wobbly no-state, regional government, the new colonial boundaries imposed by the two conquering European empires determined the boundaries of the current and proposed nation states. This colonial legacy includes Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and the Palestinian territories. Other Middle Eastern states, such as Kuwait, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman are equally synthetic because of their colonial origins.

- 2) Lack of cultural uniqueness: Because all of these nation states, including their national consciousness, nationalist institutions, and national identities are new by-products of British and French imperial control, they do not have significantly distinct cultural, linguistic, or religious differences – other than Israel. In other words, other than differences in accent, no different than regional identities in the United States, the cultural differences of Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan are minimal. They hardly meet the accepted thresholds for warranting separate nation states, which is why the Arab nationalist movement which emerged in the waning decades of the Ottoman Empire was a pan-Arabist movement focused on what could be called the Levant or Greater Syria, based on Ottoman administrative categories. If it had not been co-opted and then controlled by the British and French, this emerging post-Ottoman state would have comprised what is now Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine (including Gaza), and Jordan. It may have also included portions of what are now Egypt, Iraq, and Turkey.
- 3) Common interests among residents in different states: Furthermore, there are many issues on which the shared interests among the residents of separate but adjacent Middle Eastern states are more salient than a common interest of all the residents within each state. For example, do unions within each state have more in common with each other – given the same profession, class position, language, cultural background, and usually the same religion -- than they do with the owners and managers for whom they work? Likewise, there are often similar political parties and formations between these nation states. For example, Israeli-Canadian film maker's Just Vision project has identified hundreds of parallel Israeli and Palestinian organizations. Some of these are well known groups, such as The Parents Group or Combatants for Peace, but they also include groups dealing with youth sports and environmental issues. One of her project's goals is to pair these groups

together since in many cases they had no knowledge or contact with their recently revealed counterpart.

- 4) Nationalist claims are soft: In all of these cases, like all nationalisms, the claims of nationalists do not easily stand up to close scrutiny. In addition to the moral issues of idolatry, with quasi-religious prayers, songs, and rituals (e.g., salutes, hand on the heart) associated with nation states and national movements, there is the vague claim of an irreducible national interest, despite any convincing evidence that such a broad social phenomena as national interest even exists. Most particularly, what evidence is there that there actually is a definable, indivisible Israeli or a Palestinian national interest. On the Israeli side, national interest is invoked by advocates of the occupied territories and its opponents. Even supporters and opponents of domestic policies in Israel, such as theocratic rules, the right of return, and the role of Israeli Palestinians invoke an alleged Israeli national interest to buttress their contending view points.
- 5) Internal Palestinian Issues: Likewise, the case for a unified Palestinian national interest achieved through a state is spongy. Is there agreement on its future relationship with Israel? No. Is there agreement on whether on whether the Palestinian national interest is best met by a separate state or as part of a unified state? No. Is there agreement over the role of religion serving the Palestinian national interest in the Palestinian state? No. Most of those in Fatah support a secular political program and some are Christians, while Hamas and Islamic Jihad support an Islamic State and are allied with Shiite Iran and the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. Is their agreement on how the Palestinian national interest is best served by the economic nature of the Palestinian state? No. Fatah has become economically neo-liberal, while the remaining left-wing Palestinian parties (CPP, DFLP, PFLP) are vaguely socialist, in the sense of wanting a large state economic sector. Hamas is harder to pigeonhole, but its charter is stridently anti-Communist, even though they, too, already have a large state welfare sector in Gaza

which is similar to the public services offered by social democratic parties in Europe.

- 6) Doubts about "liberation": Some argue that despite all of these differences, that a Palestinian state, regardless of who rules it, what their policies are, and which outside countries or investors they front for, is nevertheless liberating. This argument proceeds with the claim that regardless of what the state's characteristics are, it will be a way to remove the repressive control of Israel. Possibly, but considering that the Palestinian Authority (Fatah) and Hamas both utilize beatings, incarceration, torture, and death squads against their political opponents, this dimension of liberation is problematic. It leads to the question of what exactly liberation means, who is liberated, and how they are liberated. For example, does it mean the end of class inequality and economic exploitation since both Fatah and Hamas are capitalist parties with links to outside imperialists? Does it mean the end of outside economic control even though Fatah and the Palestinian Authority it operates have close relationships to Israel, the USA, the EU, and Arab investors? Likewise, what is the liberating effect of Hamas's linkages to wealthy Gulf Arabs and to Iran, and most likely to the EU in future. Is reintroducing indirect European influence through aid, investment, and governmental cooperation part of the liberation process?
- 7) Regional issues larger than small states: Beyond sniping at arguments favoring nation states, the Middle East faces a number of problems not easily addressed by the small nation states which now exist or are proposed. For example, harking back to the Eisenhower Administration, the issues of water cannot be resolved within Israel, with the West Bank, or within Jordan. The two obvious sources of water for the entire region, Turkey and wide-spread desalination plants, both require extensive regional cooperation, as well as substantial investments for new plants, canals, pipelines, aqueducts, and pumping stations. Like water, other environmental categories, such as air pollution and toxic

waste, can be dealt with much more effectively through a regional approach than piecemeal in small, isolated nation states. Another category, the flow of legal and illegal workers is regional, including refugees from Africa, is hard to deal with in the region's small nation states. For example, despite Israel's extremely tight borders it has several hundred thousand undocumented workers drawn from Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia. In downtown Tel Aviv there is even a Chinatown and Little India. Whole neighborhoods near the city's central bus station are now home to sub-Saharan Africans living on the edge of the Israeli economy. Several other categories are also regional, such as electrical power and transportation. In fact, the region had an integrated railroad system, the Hejaz line, under the Ottoman Empire that would require close regional cooperation to be resurrected 90 years later. Some sections still function, while others have been boarded up at borders or blown up in Middle Eastern wars.

- 8) Weak Precedents: In addition to the above issues, there is the gnawing problem of weak precedents. When it comes to two state solutions, such as India and Pakistan, the record is not good. The case for a federated or binational state, such as Canada or Belgium, is better, but hardly compelling. Finally, there are few precedents for a unitary state to resolve an ethnic conflict, with South Africa being the best example. Given the tremendous labor strife of recent weeks, it is clear that a state which addresses issues of racial and ethnic inequality, but not economic inequality, as is envisioned by most two state and one state Israel-Palestinian solutions, is likely to face serious turmoil.

### **C. How to proceed:**

The two academic advocates for a Middle East Union propose an incremental approach based on a temporary and transitional two state solution. Because this phase is highly problematic, there are other concrete initiatives which can be pursued now, whether or not a two state or even a one state solution is implemented. This is

based on the assumption that the precedent for regional solutions already exists in the form of the European Union, Mercasur in South America, ASEAN in Asia, and Caricom in the Caribbean. In North American, even NAFTA suggests that regionalization is proceeding despite much tighter U.S. borders to control drugs, immigration, and (claims of) terrorism.

Step 1: Resurrect, elaborate, and develop new regional proposals which more carefully define how a Middle East Union would function, and how it would address issues of equity, justice, and the environment in ways that a two state or unitary state could not.

Step 2: Cultivate regional contacts through the Internet, in particular bloggers from each country who can be read in neighboring states, regardless of political constraints.

Step 3: Encourage political alliances among different non-state actors over common political barriers, in particular the role of outside powers intervening directly in the region or through proxies.

Step 4: Develop programs, many of which already exist, for business cooperation on easy issues, such as tourism, in which packages regularly include Israel, the West Bank, Jordan, and sometimes Lebanon and Iraq.

Step 5: Devise international institutions and forums in which non-state actors, in particular NGOs, can work on common technical problems, such as water.

Step 6: Expand the cooperation of non-state actors to political, cultural, and scientific questions. For example, the work of Just Vision demonstrates how this process can unfold. Likewise, the work of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions demonstrates that Israelis and Palestinians can work together on social justice issues. Cultural, sports, and academic exchanges among students and faculty, are also obvious steps toward regional cooperation and integration.



Step 7: Involve state and pre-state actors into common projects, such as addressing regional water supply, water quality, electrical power, transportation, air quality, telecommunications, and immigration issues.

#### **D. THE ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF A REGIONAL/NO STATE SOLUTION**

Any analysis or resulting political program which attempts to describe and understand the Middle East through a nationalist lens will inevitably misinterpret events in this region as little more than squabbles among small national movements and nation states. The resulting political programs, such as two state or one state solutions for Israelis and Palestinians, has little chance of success because it ignores so much of what is really happening on the ground, far beyond drawing lines on the map for potential nation states.

After all, each of these "nations" and nation states are engines for profit, and that means that they have outside investors and political supporters, links with other investment engines, and an increasingly mobile working class which produces these profits. It also means that the political leaders of the nation states/national movements are also money changers in charge of the flow of aid, profits, investments, savings and remittances, raw materials, manufactured goods, and employees and potential workers which enter and leave their fiefdoms through legal and illegal means.

This is the churning protoplasm on which the nations of the area were born, promoted, and manipulated by outside investors and powers, and which are now in dramatic flux because of the regions enormously profitable oil and gas. It means their leaders are primarily nodes in a rapidly changing, global, multi-layered, political, economic, and military matrix.

The foremost macro political and economic feature effecting this area -- so comprehensively analyzed by The Nation's military editor, Michael Klare in a series of books and articles on the geo-politics of oil -- is that the Middle East, especially the Persian Gulf area,

contains two-thirds of the world's most essential and profitable commodities: oil and gas. This is why the entire region has been subjected to continued great power rivalries (i.e, inter-imperialist competition) since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This history explains the political geography of this region since the colonial boundaries established by the British and the French, as well as the colonial administrative arrangements established by them and the defeated Ottoman Empire, produced the current nation states and national movements of the modern Middle East.

In this regard, it is not just Israel which is new and contrived, but so are Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, and a potential Palestine, and even Hamastan. Their boundaries not only follow colonial lines, but their governments emerged from the colonial administrative structures largely established by the British and the French. Even their new national identities result from the region's colonial and post-colonial era great power struggles to control the regions oil and gas. Furthermore, even those modern countries, which were not directly colonized, in particular Iran and Saudi Arabia, have regimes which were and are nevertheless fully entwined in the international flow of commodities, military hardware, capital, and profits, which envelope the entire region.

To this moment one feature of this intricate political and economic history, the massive militarization of the region, not just of Israel, is a result of this inter-imperialist competition, working through compliant local post-colonial regimes, to maintain or secure this oil and gas, as well as the profits resulting from control of oil and gas.

In addition, another important result of the region's oil and gas reserves and production, again following Klare's analysis, is the concentration of trillions in petro-dollars and now petro-Euros swarming through this region. Some of it locked up in investments, but increasingly it is being transformed into working capital, such as real estate projects and industrial production, all requiring mobile battalions of multi-ethnic accountants, service employees, and construction workers to be built and operated.

Furthermore, the presences of so much available investment capital, local resources and materials, and human capital, both blue and white collar, means that the entire region is an investment target by local and outside investors. Sometimes this investment takes the form of large state enterprises, but increasingly it takes the neo-liberal form of capital run amuck, with governments using a toolbox of carrots and sticks to assist the maximization of profit, whether from local or foreign investors, as profitability abruptly twists and turns.

In this environment, the local nation states, like Israel, and national movements, like the Palestinians, are hardly independent actors. They are fully apart of the rapid flow of investments, profits, economic development, foreign and NGO aid, militarization, and wars plaguing the entire Middle East.

And, like all of the fledgling countries of this area, they have their own class structures with an investor class functioning internationally and running critical state functions, such as the military and police, a smaller investor group focused on the domestic market, small merchants and professionals, and of course, a white and blue collar working class which is increasingly mobile. People come and go for work, in and out of each territory, oblivious to assertions that they are members of the X nation. Sometimes, in fact, this mobility of the working class takes on great irony. In Israel, for example, it appears that the net entry of legal and illegal non-Jewish and non-Palestinian workers exceed the number of Diaspora Jews who Israel successfully recruits as new immigrants.

In this case, the same market forces which bring millions to work in the Gulf states, are drawing hundreds of thousands to Israel as both refugees and migrant workers. In such cases, the "laws" of capitalism appear to trump the "laws" of nation states, which can only bend to them by economically absorbing these economic immigrants or expelling small numbers as a domestic nativist political statement.

For all of these reasons, any effort to isolate the discussion, whether local histories or territorial programs, is bound to flounder. For example, in a small Palestinian state, whether viable or a Bantustan, the leaders will be little more than the agents of foreign aid donors and investors looking for profitable opportunities. If the fledgling state's leaders do not play their required role, they will be pummeled either financially or militarily, as is the case already for the both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas in Gaza.

And, what of the one state solution? Even if it can overcome the jockeying among dominant Israeli and subordinate Palestinian elites for their piece of the pie, they will still have to play the same role: inviting foreign investment, assuring profitability, and then guaranteeing the repatriation of profits. This, like in two small states, requires a strong hand to assure labor peace, low wages, low benefits, and the minimum amount of public infrastructure to make sure goods can minimally move and workers can survive.