

ODS: What's happening?

One Democratic State (ODS) has the wind at its back. The last two years have seen a flurry of organising for ODS, increasingly since December 2017 when the US/Israel axis rejected the central Palestinian demand for its capital, Jerusalem, thereby rendering the Palestinian 'state' of the two-state solution once and for all unacceptable.

But ODS is not a reaction to the infeasibility, impracticality, impossibility or 'death' of the two-state solution. First, ODS always said the two-state solution is [primarily undesirable](#), whether it is feasible or not: It partitions the homeland, does not involve real sovereignty, and leaves the refugees and the Palestinians in Israel out in the cold.

Rather, ODS has always been based on first principles: The unity of Palestine, human rights, citizenship for all who live between the river and the sea and the absolute inalienability of the right of return as citizens and property restitution for the ethnically-cleansed Palestinians wherever they live.

Such a clear position, thwarted by the Zionism of the powers that be, was held by the Palestinian leadership from 1918 until 1948 in testimony before the King-Crane Commission in 1919, resolutions of the seven Palestine Arab Congresses between 1919 and 1928, petitions to the British Mandatory and League of Nations in the 1930s, positions at the St James Roundtable talks of 1939, at the Anglo-American Commission in 1946 and at the UN Special Committee on Palestine in 1947.

While the PLO Charters of 1964 and 1968 lack detail about the envisaged independent Palestinian state, until 1974 the Palestinian National Councils pursued one secular, democratic state in all of Palestine, supported by 99% of Palestinians. This leadership then over a period of fifteen years gradually abandoned ODS in favor of the Bantustan solution promised by the Oslo accords twenty years later.

That is, until the late 1980s the core of the two-state solution – accepting partition, accepting Jewish ethno-religious rights in Palestine, ditching the refugees – was never really worth talking about. The Galilee-based [Abnaa al-Balad](#) and the [Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine](#) rejected the PLO change, keeping the ODS vision alive under severe repression by the Zionist entity. The revival of the ODS vision after the Oslo disaster was led by such as Edward Said, Ghada Karmi, Azmi Bishara and Tony Judt.

Between 2004 and 2007 the books appeared: Mazin Qumsiyeh's *Sharing the Land of Canaan*, Virginia Tilley's *The One-State Solution*, Ali Abunimah's *One Country*, Ghada Karmi's *Married to Another Man*. Conferences were held in Madrid, Southampton, Haifa, Boston, London, Stuttgart, Munich, Zürich, Dallas, Toronto. Articles were written, anthologies appeared: Jamil Hilal's *Where Now for Palestine?*, Lowenstein & Moor's *After Zionism*, Hani Faris's *The Failure of the Two-State Solution*, as well as Ofra Yeshua-Lyth's *The Case for a Secular New Jerusalem*.

As well as these authors, leaders like Omar Barghouti, George Bisharat, Susan Abulhawa, Ilan Pappé, Nur Masalha, Leila Farsakh, Haim Bresheeth, Annemarie Jacir, Joseph Massad, Salman Abu Sitta and Norton Mezvinsky all came out publicly for ODS. [BADIL](#) and academics such as Walid Khalidi, Victor Kattan, Rex Brynen, Naseer Aruri, Francis Boyle, Rosemary Sayigh and John Quigley worked ceaselessly for the right of return, which can happen only within the ODS framework.

Finally, organisation

The political party [National Democratic Assembly](#) (*Tajammua*, or *Balad*), currently part of the Joint List in the Knesset, has for the last twenty years advocated an Israel that is 'the state of its citizens', not of Jews only, while standing strongly by the right of return. Its program would render the areas occupied in 1948 truly democratic, but was less specific on re-unification of Palestine and the *modalities* of return. ODS – that is, bog-standard democratic ideology – was the reason for the effective exile of its then leader Azmi Bishara in 2007.

Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) of course also implies ODS. If the [three conditions stated in 2004](#) for calling off the boycott were fulfilled – sovereignty for the West Bank and Gaza Strip, absolute equality for the Palestinian citizens of Israel, and Return – you would have what might be called Two Democratic States. But if one adds the fourth BDS demand, that for Palestinian self-determination, which since Woodrow Wilson's day adamantly included rejection of partition of the homeland, re-unification into a single state follows rigorously.

Three declarations similar to ODS but leaning somewhat towards the contrasting *bi-national* solution appeared in 2006-2007, written by Palestinians in Israel: [The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel](#) of the National Committee for the Heads of the Arab Local Authorities in Israel, [The Democratic Constitution](#) of Adalah, and [The Haifa Declaration](#) of Mada al-Carmel, the Arab Center for Applied Social Research.

The sites [1not2](#) and [One Democracy](#), based in England, and One Democratic State, based in Texas (website presently hijacked), carried the torch internationally for some time. The latter group is led by Samir Abed Rabbo, author of the Munich Declaration of 2012 which unites three further groups formed in 2013: in May the [Popular Movement for One Democratic State on the Land of Historic Palestine](#), also in May the Jaffa ODS group, and in July in England the group [ODS in Palestine Ltd](#). The straightforward, one-page [Munich Declaration](#) builds upon and is consistent with several ODS declarations that went before, written by people named above.

Most of the fifty members of the Popular Movement for ODS live in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but also in Turkey, Switzerland, England and the US. It is registered as a Swiss Association at Handelsregisteramt Zürich, Nr. CHE-390-290.948. Its Board members

include Radi Jarai, Imad Saed, Ibrahim Saad, Ghada Karmi, Munir Abbushi, Ilan Pappé, Sameer Sbaihat, Walid Abu Tayeh and myself.

Most of the thirty members of ODS in Palestine Ltd live in England, some remaining anonymous in order to avoid the wrath of the apartheid state. It is registered as a Company Limited by Guarantee, Nr. 08615817. It has organised talks on ODS by [Ghada Karmi](#), [Ilan Pappé](#), [Karl Sabbagh](#), [Salma Karmi](#), [Awad Abdelfattah](#), [Ruba Salih](#) and [Gideon Levy](#), made a large metal [key of return](#) which stands in front of St Mary's Cathedral in Edinburgh, and seeks to complement the solidarity work being done on other fronts by focussing on the ODS *solution*.

Two further groups have emerged in 2016 and 2017. [The One State Foundation](#) is a non-membership group registered in Holland. Its three Board members are Hamada Jaber, Ofer Neiman and Angelique Eijpe, a Dutch diplomat. It laudably publishes in Arabic, English and Hebrew, and its Facebook page already has around 6,000 likes. Another group, organised primarily by Jeff Halper, is made up almost exclusively of Jewish Israelis and Palestinian citizens of Israel, and has been meeting in Haifa and Exeter. It leans somewhat towards the collective political rights of groups of citizens, defined on ethnic criteria, rather than the strictly individual-rights approach of ODS.

Other active individuals insist that the word 'secular' should appear in the name or title of an ODS movement or group, but it remains to be seen if they will become publicly visible as such a group.

Finally, [some liberal Zionists](#) as well as the group [Independent Jewish Voices](#) have put forth the idea of [a true democracy](#) for all now living between the river and the sea, but their position of compromise on right of return and retention of the Israeli Law of Return is incompatible with ODS.

Debates and unity?

The right of return is the linchpin of the liberation of Palestine. This right means that any Palestinian wishing to return to places of origin (homes) in the territory now called Israel, from which they were displaced since 1948, could literally do so. Over 8 million Palestinians fit this description, and could join the almost 2 million Palestinians now living in the 48-occupied territory.

It also means that they all would be re-enfranchised as citizens of Palestine – whatever the formal structure of that state is, and whether or not they immigrated to Palestine. It also means full restitution of their property and compensation for losses incurred by dispossession and displacement since 1948. As in 1947, well over 90% of the land of historic Palestine would be under Palestinian private or municipal or *waqf* ownership.

While the right of return, respect for the human rights listed for instance in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and normal democratic rules of governance unify all of these groups and individuals, there are some areas of debate.

Most importantly, should ethnic or religious groups be explicitly granted political rights in Palestine? The century-old tradition of a state of its citizens, a continuation actually of the Ottoman regime from 1908 onwards, which included Moslems, Jews, Christians, Armenians, Druze, Europeans, and Circassians, was overturned by Britain with the words of Herbert Samuel and Winston Churchill in the [White Paper of 1922](#), stating that “the Jewish people... is in Palestine as of right and not on the sufferance.”

That is, it is not some Jewish individuals, but all Jews anywhere, that have political rights *in Palestine*. The British had adopted this Zionist nation-state goal. Of course this notion, like the idea that Hindus or Druze or Roman Catholic Christians, say, have political claims to Palestine by virtue of their genes or religion, is not to be taken seriously.

The fear of many supporters of ODS, however, is that acknowledging any collective rights defined in terms of race or religion could open the door to some such bi-nationalism, the ideology that there are two (actually there are more) ethnically-defined ‘nations’ in historic Palestine with equal collective rights: the old, false picture of parity, two sides with equal ethical claims fighting for one state.

It is often overlooked that the collective claims of Palestinians are not defined racially, but rather multi-racially as the land’s indigenous people. Their claims are justifiable in terms of collective self-determination, but the collective is territorially and historically defined, not racially.

Of course it is possible that the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), one of the two large Palestinian political groups, is making political claims for Moslems which would trump those of non-Moslems. Its [new Document](#) released last May, after all, states that Palestine’s “frame of reference is Islam” and that it is “an Arab Islamic land”.

Hamas of course envisions a re-unified independent Palestine and supports right of return without any ifs and buts, but likely differs from ODS in regarding as “Palestinians” only “Arabs who lived in Palestine until 1947”, leaving the question of the *citizenship* of non-Arabs open. While ODS would treat all present Israeli Jews also as citizens, albeit comprising a minority, Hamas on this formulation would have to adopt a concept of ‘non-Palestinian citizen of Palestine’. Similarly, the [Islamic Movement in Israel](#) would have to square the circle of a state which is both democratic and either ‘Arab’ or ‘Islamic’.

Another debate is over the word ‘secular’, which in English means not atheism or state opposition to religion, but rather merely the separation of state and religion (and

ethnicity). However, in Arabic and in the political history of Palestine and the wider Near East the term does apparently carry such connotations. Thus, the Munich Declaration in Articles 4 and 5 describes a secular state without using the word.

A final issue is the exact nature of the restitution of property. The wheel must not be re-invented, as precedents abound, not least pertaining to the property of Jews confiscated in the 1930 and 1940s in Europe. The view applied in those cases took property rights strictly, and in the case of Palestine would mean that once ownership reverts to Palestinians or a Palestinian political or religious institution, the restored owners would have the right to say what happens on that land and who lives and works there. That is what ownership normally means.

The contrasting view would abrogate this conception of property rights in order to assure that no Jewish individual – or, for that matter, no Palestinian resident on other Palestinians' land – would be evicted; the search is for a politically necessary collective compromise in spite of the inalienability of property rights in international law. Here, it seems, the human rights of dispossessed Palestinians might have to be weighed against the humanitarian situation of people, descendants of recent immigrants, who were born into residency and life in Palestine.

ODS is a positive vision

Again, in portraying ODS we don't have to even mention the two-state solution, or its demise, its impossibility or even its blatant violation of most of the rights of the vast majority of Palestinians. Whatever the ethics and practical politics of the two-state farce, they are a negative distraction and can be safely ignored.

What's more, ODS can be argued for while avoiding any obsession with Israel, what it does, what it wants, who it is. The argument proceeds from Palestinian rights, period. Such focus on Israelis – on whether they will 'accept' ODS or not – is even a form of *normalisation*. A shift from criticising Israel to ignoring it might be salutary.

Anything other than the one *undemocratic*, apartheid state now existing, which bars 7 million Palestinians from entering Palestine, much less returning to it, must be achieved by extreme and manifold outside pressure on the Israeli state. While ODS wholeheartedly welcomes any Jewish Israeli, it tends to take a sober look at dialogue with Zionism, a dialogue that has been going on in vain for over 100 years – the more so as between 80 and 90% of Jewish Israelis hold firmly to Zionism.

Working on convincing *Palestinians* to stand behind ODS, on the other hand, holds promise – the more so as at least half of them are sympathetic to it. While visiting Lebanon last year I met no Palestinian who did not support ODS. Recent polls of only West Bank and Gaza Strip residents even show over 40% support, and since ODS is the

only solution that does justice to the Palestinians in the diaspora, it is a safe assumption that ODS has an overwhelming majority when *all Palestinians* are asked.

Encouraging is the movement of diaspora Palestinians which, as the [Palestine Abroad Conference](#), co-chaired by Majed Al-Zeer of the [Palestinian Return Centre](#), held a meeting attended by over 5,000 people in Istanbul in February 2017. While I know little about this group, its program is likely to be uncompromising on right of return and de-partition of the homeland.

Like other international supporters of all the rights of all Palestinians, I have had to pick and choose from among Palestinian positions. There is no unifying position. What's more, there is no vision. Like other seemingly impossible yet ultimately successful quests – anti-slavery, say, or women's suffrage, or anti-South African Apartheid or, indeed, Zionism – it seems to me the Palestinian cause needs a vision.

The two-state solution is anything but a vision. While no non-Palestinian should argue for one second with any Palestinian who has paid the dues, who believes that suffering has gone on long enough, and that one must take anything that would count as a Palestinian state in the homeland, we do have the option of respecting Palestinians who hold that two-state position but working with those Palestinians and Jewish Israelis who want democracy beyond ethnicity, religion and colonialism, and the return, as citizens, of all Palestinians.

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