

## “From the River to the Sea”: Really?

For almost 20 years the Cambridge branch of the UK Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) has run a stall every Saturday on Market Square to distribute information about Palestine, sell olive oil, spices, and coffee cups, and talk to market visitors.

Arguments and discussions with the public often end with the question, ‘I see that the Palestinians have been fundamentally wronged, and have a very strong case, but what’s the answer? What’s the solution?’

On the basis of general solidarity with Palestine I have no answer because Palestinian opinion on solutions is fragmented. Some want a state on the 1967 borders. Some want a bi-national solution between the river and the sea, with political parity between the Palestinian and Jewish communities. Some want a re-unified Islamic state. Some want a non-sectarian, re-unified Palestine of its citizens.

Virtually all want the implementation of right of return, which meets with the sympathy of most Westerners, and it was easy to explain that this wasn’t compatible with the two-state solution. But I had no ‘take-home’ message.

### What is ODS?

The most appealing system to Westerners I talk with is One Democratic State (ODS), the familiar system of their own countries. It includes for all Palestinians citizenship and uncompromised right of return to their places of origin within historic Palestine – and [citizenship](#) even for those choosing not to return to Palestine – and lets the majority decide things within the constraints of individual human and political rights.

For the purposes of this article I’m defining ODS as does the [Munich Declaration](#), wherein the ‘Democratic’ part also advocates automatic citizenship for all present Jewish Israelis – admittedly a very big ask for Palestinians – and answers the need for the protection of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities by enshrining the rights of free expression and association. Some people include under an ODS banner alternatives ranging from restricting citizenship to non-war criminals all the way to an ‘Algerian solution’ – but this is not the ODS discussed here.

More specific questions – property restitution, compensation, local autonomy – are being debated within the broad ODS community.

Members of the UK PSC, as well as solidarity people in the other places I’ve lived, namely Turkey and Switzerland, are increasingly enamoured of the idea. Its rival ideas are only 4 in number: 1) the single *undemocratic* state which has taken over Palestine; 2) the two-state solution where one of the states is a Zionist one on the 1967 borders; 3) an Islamic Palestine; and 4) bi-nationalism.

With all due respect for Hamas and its May 2017 [A Document of General Principles and Policies](#), it is hard for me to understand how a state can't be both Jewish and democratic yet could be both Moslem and democratic – but that is another discussion. As for bi-nationalism, it is almost impossible to pin down what it actually means; but its premise that there are two politically equal collectives violates the basic idea of ODS.

The relevant rivalry is thus between two-states (a euphemism for Partition) and one democratic one. There are not dozens of 'solution-flavours' to choose from.

## **BDS**

The closest thing to a universal Palestinian cause seems to be BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions). Although not supported by all Palestinians, adherence to it is wide and public enough that we at the stall and in other conversations could point to it as an answer to the Palestinian plight. Instead of stammering something like 'Well, the Palestinians are divided on what they want', we could point to the four demands of BDS named in the [BDS Call](#) of 2005: self-determination, return, equality within the 1948-occupied territories and sovereignty for the 1967-occupied territories.

To reach people on the street the succinct demands of the Call are an improvement over phrases like 'End the occupation', 'End the siege of Gaza', 'Stop financing Israeli apartheid', 'Hold Israel accountable to international law' or the vague 'liberation of Palestine'. They are a needed *ideology*.

To be sure, a problem arises with the Call's demanding Israel's "Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the Wall". "All Arab lands" on the face of it means all of historic Palestine, which most Palestinians correctly regard as occupied and colonised. "Dismantling the Wall", moreover, makes more sense when erasing the Green Line is the actual demand – re-creating one state. But some Palestinians argue that this demand refers only the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem, and indeed, one of the three demands is "recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality", implying that the Jewish state remains in the picture.

## **ODS as a 'solution'**

For two decades ODS advocacy has grown. Around 2000 seminal articles appeared by Ghada Karmi and Edward Said, the latter mixing it with bi-nationalism. Around the time of the BDS Call the idea was fleshed out in entire books on ODS by Karmi, Mazin Qumsiyeh, Ali Abunimah and Virginia Tilley, and since 2007 there have been about a dozen international conferences and online statements of principles.

Its pedigree extends much further back. The PLO during its first decade insisted on the all-unifying goal of a single secular state before moving gradually, in the years 1974-

1988, towards acceptance of Israel and Partition. Before that, in the two years after World War II, Palestinians and their Arab and Indian supporters argued against both bi-nationalism and the mooted two-state solution in favour of a normal democracy including all presently resident Jews.

The entire Mandate period, as well, starting around 1920, saw a steady stream of Palestinian-penned manifestos and position papers calling for independence as a “representative democracy” in treaty relations with Britain. The petitioners included the Moslem-Christian Associations, the Palestine Arab Congresses, the General Syrian Congresses, the Women’s Congresses and the Arab Higher Committees, led by such as Musa Kazem al-Husseini, Mohamed Osman, George Antonius, Akram Zuaytir, Jamal al-Husseini, Awni Abdul Hadi, Musa Alami, Mrs. Mogannam Mogannam, Izzat Tannous, Izzat Darwaza, Muhammad El Taher, Elias Koussa, Henry Cattan and Isa Nakhleh.

The ODS vision is thus anything but an idea coming from outside the Palestinian polity – in sharp contrast to the two-state solution, which was cooked and canned by both soft and hard Zionists in London, New York and Tel Aviv.

Of course many Palestinians have argued with good reason and noble motives for accepting Partition. They may have lost enough friends, relatives, tears, land, homeland and political voice, making them willing, after paying the price of resistance for decades, to settle for one-fifth of Palestine if the Palestinians could there finally experience true sovereignty.

Edward Said embraced this solution in his 1979 book *The Question of Palestine* (e.g. p 175), and Walid Khalidi, who in 1978 in *Foreign Affairs* argued for ‘Thinking the Unthinkable’ (recognition of Israel on the 67 borders), made a moving appeal for it in 1992 after

... taking cognizance of the losses, the sufferings, and the gains of the two protagonists since the conflict began, as well as of a historical compromise rooted in the soil of the conflict... Only such a state will have the psycho-political appeal and symbolism for the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and the Diaspora to act as a balm to their wounds, to give redress for the monumental injustices suffered, and to compensate for the loss of hearth and home and ancestral grave and for the surrender of primaevial historic rights. (*Palestine Reborn*, pp 195-96)

International ODS supporters, who have not gone through any lived Palestinian experience, respect this position which attempted to rescue the core of a Palestinian national existence in the face of redoubled attempts by Israel, Jordan, Egypt and the Powers to eradicate Palestine once and for all. It was also hoped by many that two separate states would be a stage on the way to a single democracy.

That said, nobody claimed the two-state solution brought justice. Today, even some who lean towards support for the two-state solution acknowledge the compatibility of all

the rights of all the Palestinians with the ODS solution. Nadia Hijab, for instance, [wrote](#) that “The vision of a one-state solution, as set out by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1968, has always been more compelling for Palestinians than that of two states.”

But what if ODS was not *possible*? One can argue with dignity for the best solution among all *possible* ones, and declare ODS to be impossible, but aside from the two-state solution’s unjustness – viz., the Palestinian one of the two states is hardly a state, and no word is wasted on the Palestinians in exile or those within Israel – if it has not been possible for the last 30 years, when will it be?

What is possible, or ‘feasible’, nobody knows. What does seem clear is that during these last decades the two-state solution has inspired next to no grassroots solidarity outside Palestine. Was it simply not just enough? Can ODS better inspire internationals?

## **BDS and ODS**

I think so, just as has BDS. But first, what is the logical relationship between BDS and ODS, which despite [support](#) from many leaders of the BDS movement is not as popular? As Noura Erakat [called for](#) nine years ago – and Yara Hawari [more recently](#) (including [replies](#) thereto and her reply) – it is fruitful to look at what the rights called for by BDS logically entail in terms of political conclusions.

If the BDS demand is for ending the occupation of *all of* Palestine (“all Arab lands”), then together with its call for “the Palestinian people’s inalienable right to self-determination”, BDS strictly implies ODS. If the same citizen-equality applies to the new Palestinian state as that demanded within present-day Israel, it would not be just de-partitioned but democratic.

If, on the other hand, a separate state remains west of the Green Line, and even if Palestinians would outnumber Jewish Israelis due to the return of millions, the ‘One’ in ODS would not quite be the case. Literally, this solution would be TDS, two democratic states.

The question would then be whether there was any reason not to let ‘grow together what belongs together’, as happened with the Germanies. Never mind that thousands of Palestinians, starting in 1936, have died fighting partition, with many more wounded and exiled and dispossessed. There still could be good reasons to keep the two democratic states separate, and wait for majorities in each country to decide the question.

## **What motivates?**

In the cases of South Africa and the U.S. Civil Rights movement, solidarity activists could unequivocally point to the goal: citizenship, equality, independence, one person,

one vote. The people liberating themselves were united on the basic demand. The 'Bantustan solution' was early on rejected by a large majority of South African Blacks, and in North America nothing less than full 'integration' would do.

The abolition of slavery, women's suffrage and, for that matter, Zionism, also reached success through unity around a simple non-compromising vision. Whether there is a lesson here for the Palestinian struggle, I don't know. What I do claim, from my own experience, is that simple, non-compromising ODS comes across well amongst citizens of the powerful countries who could foment international pressure on Israel to give up its ethnocracy.

Amongst Palestinians, both BDS and right of return are uncontestedly popular – [for instance in Lebanon](#) – but does this imply equally widespread support for their near-corollary, ODS?

An easily-communicable, unifying Palestinian narrative is lacking, yet would be a boon for the international campaign. To be legitimate it would have to be backed by a majority of Palestinians. But nobody knows the numbers concerning how many Palestinians support this or that – because nobody ever asks (all of) them. Polls by the [Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research](#) ask only residents of remnant-Palestine, i.e. those in historic Palestine but not in Israel. [Another analysis](#), by the Washington Institute for Middle East Policy, dated February 2020, did claim to cover *all* Palestinians, finding that two states had "lost majority support", with "most... preferring regaining all of historic Palestine", but that "West Bankers and Gazans" remain more "pragmatic".

Concerning legitimisation, Marwa Fatafta has recently [argued](#) the indispensability of reviving the PLO as a body representative of the people rather than of political factions. Covering all Palestinians, it could determine the democratic legitimacy of one position or the other. But to my knowledge there is simply no database of all Palestinians which would enable a definitive referendum.

It is a worthy goal that those of us in solidarity should be 'guided' or 'led' by Palestinians, but we can only ask, 'Which Palestinians?' Those supporting partition, or those supporting reunification and democracy?

Given this situation many solidarity people stay out of it. They stay neutral on the two-state/one-state question, often self-righteously saying, 'That's up to the Palestinians', as if there were any doubt that only Palestinians have the right to vote on the matter.

However, I can't stay neutral because that means at least being *open to a* Zionist, apartheid solution that leaves an ethnocracy in 80% of Palestine and leaves the returnees out in the cold. Judged on basic ethical principles, the two-state option is just too bad. For a *Palestinian* to support or stay open to such an admittedly bad outcome is one thing, but for a Westerner to do so is something else, and in very bad taste.

We internationals do, I believe, as human beings regardless of our 'subject positions', have the right to support all the rights of all the Palestinians – and we immediately see that this can only be the case under ODS. But do I have the right to advocate for *denying* most of them, as does the two-state solution, in the absence of clear evidence that a majority of Palestinians take that position? I think not.

In the *Journal of Palestine Studies* in 1979 Fayez Sayegh summarised the two-state solution proposed by Begin, Sadat and Carter (and the 1979 Palestinian National Council) thus:

A fraction of the Palestinian people (under one-third of the whole) may attain a fraction of its rights (not including its inalienable right to self-determination and statehood) in a fraction of its homeland (less than one-fifth of the area of the whole). ... [T]he vast majority of Palestinians is condemned to permanent loss of its Palestinian national identity, to permanent exile, to the permanent separation of most Palestinians from one another and from Palestine - in short, to a life without national hope or meaning. (p 40)

With the secular democratic state option so clearly winning the comparison with this end-game, it is a curious thing to put these two solutions on any kind of equal footing and not take sides.

If I knew that 90% of Palestinians were reluctantly behind some such vision, I would do my bit to support them. But today, if the PA Ambassador to London, or Bern, called for a rally supporting the two-state solution, I would not go. Going would be normalising Israel. It would also be repudiating the recently popular goal of de-colonisation, seeing as *all* of Palestine has long been colonised – by Istanbul, London, or Tel Aviv. How can de-colonisation translate into anything but a single Palestine?

What we are encouraged to shout at rallies – and like to shout – is *From the River to the Sea, Palestine Will Be Free*. But how does this jibe with anything but a single state of Palestine, on all of historic Palestine, from the river to the sea, filled with returned Palestinians, as Ali Abunimah recently [underscored](#).

## Rights only

A second way for non-Palestinians to stay on the fence is to support only Palestinians' *rights*, usually as enumerated in the BDS Call – even if, again, not all Palestinians support BDS. I've tried to show that BDS does have 'solution' implications – either Two Democratic States or One – although its most well-known exponent [has argued](#) for “avoiding the prescription of any particular political formula.” This however leads to a question incisively [raised](#), for instance, by Tamara Ben-Halim, who attests that

Many people within the movement internationally are still figuring out how important it is to be working towards a particular end game, or whether it's sufficient at the moment to be struggling for rights, in absence of a unified leadership.

My own process of figuring this out has led me to believe it is better for internationals to 'err on the side of' justice. And by the way while Palestinians, even some in exile, often run existential risks by supporting ODS – or BDS, for that matter – we do not have this excuse.

Hazem Jamjoum [has argued](#), more fundamentally, that limiting Palestinian demands to those for the fulfilment of the rights they in fact have has meant relinquishing the political realm to others. By thus “shifting the emphasis to legalist frameworks, the Palestinian struggle, at least on an international scale, risks losing sight of its fundamentally political nature.” I don't know if he supports the political ODS message, but I do know that arguing only from rights concepts, while staying strictly silent on solutions, is *relatively* ineffective at stalls such as the one in Cambridge – both because rights and solutions are logically tied together and because people want to know – they insistently ask – what the end-game is.

## **Our 'subject position'**

Supporting those Palestinians (and Jewish Israelis) who support ODS – picking and choosing from among the positions – is not the same as 'telling the Palestinians what's good for them'. First of all, no Palestinian has to listen to a single word we say. Supporting a rock-solid Palestinian idea, even if it is not supported by all Palestinians, is not 'telling' anybody anything. Two-staters Joe Biden and Josep Borrell might have to be listened to, but not we.

Even if we are expressing an opinion on what 'should happen' in Palestine – as we might on what should happen in China, Cuba or the U.S.A. – I believe there is a difference between saying, as a good friend of mine did recently, that 'The two-state solution, all things considered, is the best', and saying 'I'm for all the rights of all the Palestinians, and that implies ODS'. The one objectively denies many Palestinians the greater part of their rights, while the second, in the absence of any Palestinian consensus, seems a reasonable starting position – whatever compromises Palestinians might agree to if and when Israel ever comes to the table.

At the very least, I hope it is understandable that for a non-Palestinian the two-state solution cannot have anywhere near the motivating power of the one-democratic-state solution. And if international opinion is important at all, it is missing a trick not to tap this reservoir of support.

## **International pressure**

I assume that international opinion matters. I don't know the relative importance of Palestinians-only thought and activity, as opposed to that of the rest of the world. To be sure, the BDS Call seeks support from the “international community”, from “international civil society organizations and people of conscience all over the world”. And I do think

that a change in international opinion towards the fulfilment of Palestinians' rights could eventually change the balance of power.

But what is the concise, easily-grasped message we should spread "all over the world"? Nadia Hijab has [pointed out](#), regarding both Palestinians and internationals, that

It is natural that a people in quest of national and human rights and their allies should want clarity about and unity on the end political goal. In addition, the growing split between those arguing for one state or a civil rights struggle, many of whom are Palestinian activists and their grassroots supporters, on the one hand, and those espousing two states on the other, of whom many are Palestinian officials and businessmen (as well as liberal Zionists), has been detrimental to the Palestinian ability to coalesce around collective action.

I think international pressure would be strengthened by an "end political goal" as clear, simple, familiar and inspiring as the ANC vision for South Africa.

## **An ODS Call?**

A few years back my wife, who also supports those Palestinians and Jewish Israelis who support ODS, ventured that what is needed is a Palestinian Call for ODS. Like the BDS Call, and by the same logic, it would *come from Palestinians only*. Calls thus formulated have authenticity.

Not only does it go without saying that it is the Palestinians who have to live with the consequences of any envisioned solution, but also, until there is a clear Palestinian call for a course of action, any advocacy beyond general support for 'Palestinian rights' and against 'Israeli apartheid' lacks legitimation if not backed up by a large, visible group of Palestinians.

Parallel and connected to such an initiative would be one organised by, and speaking directly to, Jewish Israelis.

## **A positive vision**

In 2012 Noura Erakat [wrote](#) that

*Palestinians should adopt a one-state solution as a political vision that aims for the equality of all persons irrespective of nationality, ethnicity, religion, or race. By endorsing a one-state solution, we are calling for the dismantlement of an institutionalized racism that privileges Jewish nationals above their non-Jewish Arab Palestinian counterparts rather than supporting the creation of two ethnically homogenous states. In a sense, this vision sacrifices nationalism for a more liberal concept of equality and democratic pluralism. ... In effect, Palestinians must accept the permanent presence of Israeli nationals in Mandate Palestine and the simultaneous removal of its Zionist identity and constitution.*

Palestinian nationalism should not be given up, that is, but re-defined.



I think Erekat is right in calling this a “vision”, and since it expresses both what it’s against and what it’s for it is more positive than mere anti-Zionism, de-colonisation, anti-apartheid or ‘ending the occupation’. It can be argued that a successful movement needs positivity.

The [ODS Campaign](#), based mostly in historic Palestine, also [has asserted](#) the necessity for a “political program”, a set of concrete goals to rally around:

In recent years, the idea of a one democratic state in all of historic Palestine as the best solution to the conflict has re-emerged. ... The two-state solution, which is basically an unfair solution, is clearly dead. ... [W]e contend that the only way to achieve justice and permanent peace is dismantling the colonial apartheid regime in historic Palestine and the establishment of a new political system based on full civil equality, and on full implementation of the Palestinian refugees’ Right of Return...

A “system”, or a “vision”, has in my view stronger motivating power than either a call for a set of rights or a set of things one is *against*. Of course while being against colonisation etc. *follows from* what one is for – whether the older ‘secular democratic state’ or ODS – negative framings go only so far.

I’d also like to suggest that Palestinian messages be measured in comparison to the Zionist message-juggernaut with which we have been carpet-bombed for a century. After the abandonment of the single secular state vision thirty or forty years ago, Palestinian messages have been not only contradictory (one state, two states? rights, solutions?) but, *in comparison with* Zionism’s demand for everything, timid. The (positively-framed) ideology of Zionism takes the stage unabashedly, and overturning it perhaps requires an equal amount of direct ambition.

Libraries and online media are filled with detailed written, filmed and photographed accounts of Zionism doing its daily work; the indictment at that level has been composed and is available to all. The theory of Zionism, as well, has been exposed for what it is in dozens of books and essays in the English language alone, let alone in Arabic. But international opinion is now stranded at the stage of seeing and condemning Israel’s worst crimes but still accepting Israel as a state. What I think is missing is more information, clarity and details ‘at the other end’ of the narrative: What does the *just* solution look like? The public still simply knows little about it.

I don’t know the ins and outs of intra-Palestinian thinking or intellectual conflict, but do have this concrete question for the community which has coalesced around Al Shabaka and befriended organisations: How do they judge the resonance of ODS amongst Palestinians and – many of them are well-acquainted with the West – amongst internationals? Can the two-state solution, and the Palestinian Authority which supports it, now be both safely and profitably repudiated?

I believe ODS is potentially very popular in the West, but not only there. As Nadia Hijab and Ingrid Jaradat Gassner [have argued](#), the “international framework of decolonization” – something only ODS embodies – “mobilizes solidarity and support” particularly “among formerly colonized nations”. I think it would have even more traction if the Palestinians who support it would make a Call for it.

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