

## Guest editorial

The most elaborate conference to deal with the idea of the one-state solution to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and the first ever held in North America convened at the University of Massachusetts – Boston on 28–29 March 2009. It was sponsored by the Trans Arab Research Institute (TARI), an independent American Think Tank, and the William Joiner Center for the Study of War and Social Consequences.

The convenors were convinced the time had come for the international community to pronounce that the conditions Israel had created in the occupied territories render the two-state solution an impossibility. They further believed there is an urgent need to start exploring in earnest the only option for a peaceful negotiated settlement offering peace with justice for all concerned: Israeli Jews, Palestinian citizens of Israel, the 1948 refugees and their descendants, and those who have endured more than four decades of military occupation – a single democratic, secular and multicultural state in all of historic Palestine. The task set for the conference was ambitious, but vital. Some 35 world-renowned scholars affiliated with some of the world’s best-known institutions of higher learning and an audience of more than 500 met to consider the idea of One State for Palestine/Israel: A Country for All Its Citizens.

A few words about the one state are in order. The idea and this conference in turn were the subject of misguided ridicule by a number of Jews and Palestinians alike. It was described as ‘total illusion’ and its advocates as ‘inveterate dreamers’ and ‘time wasters’. Worse still, the conference was called ‘biased, anti-Israel and possibly anti-Semitic’. It was also branded as an attempt to normalize relations between Palestinians and Israelis, drawing attention away from Israeli policies and practices, and a betrayal of historic Palestinian rights. The attacks on the conference by both sides are principally due to the fact that the idea of the one state is the least understood for what it is and for what it is not in both the Israeli and the Palestinian political vocabularies. This can be illustrated by reference to three points.

First, there is a general tendency among people to think in either/or dualities or bipolar relationships, rather than in a continuum or a dialectical interaction. The one-state idea is seen as the antithesis of the two-state idea. Since the latter represents today the international consensus on the solution to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, and both sides to the conflict pay it lip-service, many observers discuss the one-state idea as an attempt at undermining the international effort to resolve the conflict. But the one-state idea is not the inverse of the two-state solution. Were Israel to withdraw to its 1967 borders, allow the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state, and address the Palestinian right of return, most individuals, if not all, would not hesitate to support such a settlement. Alas, facts on the ground tell a different story. For all practical purposes, a viable two-state solution is out of reach and a point of no return has arrived. The cancerous growth of Jewish colonies in the West Bank is so invasive and the number of colonial settlers so large, Palestinians and the international

community face a situation where the occupier's intent to annex rather than withdraw from the territories is made clearer everyday. So many experts have demonstrated in a convincing manner the impossibility of the rise of a meaningful two-state system, i.e. two sovereign states along the 1967 borders. The charade of a peace process, ongoing for the last 17 years, is playing into the hands of the Zionist colonial settlement project, allowing it to continue to annex the land and effect a quiet population transfer. Clearly, the most the Palestinians can hope for in such circumstances is a bogus Palestinian entity with a minuscule and truncated structure. If the last 16 years have been a total waste with respect to the human condition and the national life of the Palestinians under occupation, then who is the dreamer and who is the realist in assessing the prospect of a viable two-state settlement?

Second, all sides – Palestinian, Israeli and international – ultimately invoke the same rationale to explain their opposition to the one-state idea. They all believe that the overwhelming power the Israelis enjoy will prevent the one-state idea from ever being realized. The Israelis are advantaged by the status quo and will, in time, force the Palestinians to yield to their demands on West Bank territory, resources and demography. Solutions are dictated by the powerful and the only one-state solution the Israeli political/military establishment favours is one that yields to Israel control over most of historic Palestine, if not all of it. However, this form of thinking is captivated by the politics of the moment. Recent precautionary statements by Ehud Olmert and Avram Burg are telling about this mentality. At a recent conference in Herzliya, Olmert prophesied: 'We must understand that such a bi-national reality is being created and in a very short while, it will be beyond our control.' In a similar vein, Burg told the *New York Times* last December that Israel has turned into a kind of self-justifying Sparta, a warlike state on the verge of tragedy. He said, 'If we do not establish modern Israeli identity on foundations of optimism, faith in humans and full trust in the family of nations, we have no chance of existing.' In other words, if one considers the statements of Olmert and Burg carefully, the one-state settlement is imposing itself.

Third, the one state is the only idea that presents the Jewish and Palestinian sides with a win-win situation and the hope for lasting peace. A two-state solution, regardless of its terms, will not resolve the conflict on a permanent basis. The unsettled status of the Palestinians in Israel and the Diaspora will forever ensure Israel does not have the legitimacy and acceptance it seeks from the region's populations. And while Israeli Jews may be confident about their present power advantage, they fear what the future holds for them. Similarly, the Palestinians and Arabs in general deplore their present weakness but have confidence in their future. For those whose concern is the maintenance of an ethnic entity, I repeat the words of Albert Einstein: 'I should much rather see reasonable agreement with the Arabs on the basis of living together in peace than the creation of a Jewish State.'

Only four of the more than 21 essays submitted by the conference speakers are featured in this issue of *Contemporary Arab Affairs*. They deal with critical topics. Saree Makdisi outlines the manner in which successive Israeli administrations have suppressed the identity of Jerusalem and changed its demography. The author demonstrates how the Israelis have demolished the hopes of those who believed at one point in the feasibility of an independent Palestinian state with Arab East Jerusalem as its capital. George Bisharat examines the issue of mobilizing Palestinians in the service of the one-state solution and the challenges that confront such a formidable task. Nadia Hijab explains why the Palestinians must adopt the strategy of non-violent

resistance to promote the one-state solution. Finally, Omar Barghouti discusses the one-state idea within the frame of morality, international standards and the imperatives of justice. All four are original essays with powerful and convincing arguments. They are a sample of the very sophisticated thought system that is being employed to realize the vision of Palestine/Israel: A Country for All Its Citizens.

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