

A One State Solution for the Palestine-Israel conflict: an Interview with Ali Abunimah.¹

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In this interview, Abunimah discusses a 'one-state solution' for all the people of Palestine; Jews, Christians and Muslims

A two-state solution, with the land of Palestine divided into the state of Israel and a state for Palestine seems racist and unjust in the modern world. Why did the two-state solution win the support of the Palestinian leadership?

The two-state solution was adopted by the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) as a pragmatic move, without conviction. Up until the 1980s, the official Palestinian position was in favor of a one-state solution, but the PLO leadership – and Yasser Arafat – then accepted a Palestinian state only in the West Bank and Gaza. They did so with the expectation that Israel would limit its' state to the other 78% of historic Palestine.

There seems to be a strong current of political support both inside Palestine (including Hamas) and in the international community for a two-state solution. How, when and why did the one state movement (which calls for a single state of Palestine in which Jews, Christians and Muslims will live as equal citizens) emerge in Palestine?

The support for the two-state solution is without real conviction. Increasingly, those policymakers are recognizing that the two-state solution is a convenient political fiction that is unachievable on the ground. As for the Palestinian movement for one-state, I think it never went away. I do not think many Palestinians ever bought into the two-state vision with real conviction. They were persuaded it was “pragmatic.” Once they saw that it was merely a way for Israel to continue colonialism by other means – exactly like the

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Bantustans – they have started to question it. But there is a real lack of political leadership to begin to present alternatives.

What extent of support exists among Palestinians for a one state solution?

Polls show that in the West Bank and Gaza, support for the two-state solution has never been above about 60 percent, and support for a one state solution has reached about 35 percent. It is remarkable how low support for a two-state solution has been given how heavily marketed it is. And it is encouraging that support for a one-state solution is so high, given that no major political figures have openly supported it. Among Palestinian refugees who live outside Palestine, support for a two-state solution has always been low – though we do not have exact figures. But the reason for that is clear: a two-state solution means that the right of Palestinian refugees to return to most of Palestine will have to be given up (the area that would be recognized as “Israel”). They will never accept that. This is the reason that the PLO leadership gradually excluded Palestinian refugees and others outside Palestine from decision-making. Finally, among Palestinians inside the 1948 borders of Israel, there is massive support for a state of all its citizens – in other words abolishing all forms of Jewish privilege in the state. So in principle, Palestinians in Israel are in favor of such a state. When I have spoken about this issue to Palestinians, principally in North America, the main response I get by far is ‘This is a great idea, but the Israelis will refuse it.’

Have there been other forms of the one state vision presented as possible solutions in the past. If so, what lead to their failure to win support? What can be learned from those experiences?

Yes. Most recently it was the PLO’s position in the late 1960s through the 1980s’s to support a secular democratic state. But in reality this never went beyond a slogan. No serious work was done to build support for this idea among Palestinians, nor was any work done to describe what it means in practice. In particular, there was no discussion of what the position of the Israeli Jewish population would be in this vision.

How would you respond to accusations that supporters of a one state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are calling for the ‘destruction of the State of Israel’ and denying Israel’s ‘right to exist?’

We have to be clear what we are talking about. Israel, as it has existed for 60 years, is a racist state, built on the pillars of colonialism, ethnic cleansing, and legalized discrimination. This discrimination takes several forms: against Palestinians inside Israel face discrimination-- discrimination in every aspect of life, from civil rights, to land allocations to separate and unequal education, to laws confiscating the property of non-Jews and so on. Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, areas occupied in 1967, live under a military regime with all of its inhumane policies. And millions of Palestinian refugees who were forced out of Palestine in 1948 and 1967 cannot return to their homeland because of the racist Israeli laws which prevent them from returning because they are of the wrong religion. Many people describe the situation in the West Bank and Gaza (the 1967 occupied territories) – as apartheid. It should be our goal to dismantle this system and replace it with a democracy for all the people who live in Palestine/Israel. But the target is not the Israeli Jewish people. It is the racist state. The Israeli Jewish people have a right to live in peace and security, fully protected as citizens in a non-sectarian state.

In South Africa, the ANC government has close and strong ties with the Fatah movement as well as with the Palestine Liberation Organisation. Do you see this as an obstacle or an opportunity for the one state movement?

The ANC is very loyal to those who supported the anti-apartheid struggle. That is understandable and admirable. At the same time it would be a mistake to ignore the changes in the Palestinian political landscape. Twenty years ago, Hamas was a much more marginal group. Now it cannot be ignored. It must be engaged. So, while the ANC is indeed loyal to Fatah and the PLO, we know that South Africa is actively engaged in consultations with the Hamas authority which was elected in January 2006. I see that as very positive. Whether that helps or hurts a one-state movement is another matter. I have criticized both Fatah and Hamas for so far failing to articulate a compelling vision that

can serve the interests and fulfill the rights of all Palestinians, those in exile, those in Israel, and those in the West Bank and Gaza. There needs to be a much bigger vision, drawing in all segments of the Palestinian movement. That has not happened yet.

The South African struggle benefited from an international climate in which former colonies were gaining independence from colonization as well as from the promotion of liberal principles such as equality for all. Palestinians and Arabs face the reality of a ‘global war on terror’, with racial profiling of Arabs and the labeling of Palestinian freedom fighters as Al Qaeda-type terrorists. What strategies are Palestinians (within and outside the one state movement) using to counteract this and to tell their story to international civil society?

Do not forget that for many years the South African struggle was labeled as “terrorist” and “communist” in the context of a US-led global war on communism. The discourse of civilization versus barbarity is as old as colonialism itself, but it just gets reinvented in new disguises. So the Afrikaners were the ‘democrats’ and ‘civilized’ westerners facing the barbarian, communist hordes. Interestingly, the same discourse was used in Ireland, where the Catholic nationalists were portrayed by the British as backward and uncivilized. Nowadays the Israelis claim to be the ‘civilized’ westerners facing the forces of Islamic barbarism. There is nothing new in this. It poses an enormous challenge, but one that has proved surmountable.

What forms of action do you think South Africans can take to support and promote a one state solution in Palestine?

First, it is very important that we recognize that no just solution will come about simply through persuasion. The Israelis will not wake up one morning and say ‘we were wrong, let’s dismantle this racist system we have built.’ Therefore pressure in the form of boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) is essential as it will force Israel and its supporters to pay for the continuation of the Israeli apartheid system. The goal is not to punish ordinary Israelis, but to force them to consider the cost of their support for Israel’s racist policies against Palestinians. COSATU has voted to support the BDS movement, as have other South African civil society institutions, and I hope that all South Africans would follow suit.

Second, it is just as important that along with pressure, there be a vision of the future. We have to be able to say to Israeli Jews 'here is our destination. You will be stripped of your legal privileges, and there will be restitution, but you will have a safe place in the future with full guarantees for your civil, political and cultural rights – if you want it.' It has to be a principled and credible vision. I think this vision needs to be developed among Palestinians, but we can benefit from the experiences that South Africans have had. What went right? What would you do differently? South Africans did not have a road map when they set out on their unfinished journey towards a nonracial and socially just democracy. We should at least try to benefit from the experience they gained at such enormous cost.