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One state solution gains traction among Palestinians

Gulf News (United Arab Emirates). (Jan. 7, 2018) Reading Level (Lexile): 1380.

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Full Text:

Summary: Many believe that the goal of a Palestinian state has only provided cover to the Israeli occupation

Palestinians clash with Israeli soldiers in the West Bank village of Madama after Israeli settlers from Yitzha Image Credit: AFP DAVID M. HALBFINGER, New York Times

Occupied Jerusalem: The Palestine Liberation Organisation, disillusioned by the dwindling promise of a two-state solution, has been increasingly looking towards a one state solution.

For the Israelis, absorbing 3 million West Bank Palestinians means either giving up on so-called 'democracy' or accepting the end of the Jewish state.

The Palestinians, unwilling to live under apartheid-like conditions or military occupation, have long seen two separate states as their best hope.

Now, for the first time since it declared its support for a Palestinian state side-by-side with Israel in 1988, the PLO is seriously debating whether to embrace fallback options, including the pursuit of a single state.

"It's dominating the discussion," said Mustafa Barghouti, a physician who sits on the PLO's central council, which is to take up possible changes to the national movement's strategy later this month.

Palestinian supporters envision one state with equal rights for Palestinians and Jews.

Palestinians would have proportionate political power and, given demographic trends, would before long be a majority, spelling the end of the Zionist project.

That outcome is unacceptable to the Israeli right wing, which is pressing to annex the land on the occupied West Bank where Jewish colonists have built communities while consigning Palestinians to the areas where they live now.

Israeli proponents of these ideas freely acknowledge that the Palestinian areas would be considerably less than a state, at least to start: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has even called it a "state-minus."

Eventually, they say, the Palestinians could achieve statehood in a confederation with Jordan or Egypt, as part of Israel, or perhaps even independently - but not soon.

Both sides have long officially supported the idea of a two-state solution to the conflict while accusing the other of harboring designs on the whole territory.

But Trump's Occupied Jerusalem declaration last month changed the calculus.

The Trump administration has not endorsed a one-state solution, and it is working on its own peace plan, insisting that any final agreement, including borders, be negotiated by the two sides.

But last month's decision by the president to recognise Occupied Jerusalem as Israel's capital, in defiance of a decades-old US policy and international consensus and with no mention of a Palestinian claim on the city, was seen as putting his thumb on the Israeli side of the scale.

Saeb Erekat, the veteran Palestinian negotiator, said that Trump's declaration was the death knell for the two-state solution and that Palestinians should shift their focus to "one state with equal rights."

His position has since gained traction among the Palestinian leadership.

Under that idea, the Palestinian movement would shift to a struggle for equal civil rights, including the freedoms of movement, assembly and speech, and the right to vote in national elections.

"Which could mean a Palestinian could be the prime minister," Barghouti said.

To its Palestinian supporters, the one-state idea is bitter consolation after decades of striving for statehood under the Oslo peace accords, which many believe has achieved little aside from providing cover, and buying time, for Israel to expand settlements.

"When you support the two-state solution, you're supporting Netanyahu," said As'ad Ghanem, a political science lecturer at the University of Haifa who has been working with a group of Israelis and Palestinians on a one-state strategy for some time.

"It is time for us Palestinians to present an alternative."

Several efforts are underway. A decade-old group called the Popular Movement for One Democratic State, led by Radi Jarai, a former Fatah leader who served 12 years in prison in Israel after helping to lead the 1987 intifada, is planning a media campaign to explain the idea to West Bank residents.

"They think it means Palestinians will take the Israeli ID and live under an apartheid regime," he said.

"But our idea is to have one democratic state, with no privilege for the Jews or for any other ethnic or religious group."

Others are talking about drafting a prototype constitution for a single state or forming a political party in Israel and on the West Bank to push for it.

"At least 30 per cent of Palestinians support one-state when no one is talking about it," said Hamada Jaber, an organiser of a group called the One State Foundation.

"If there's at least one political party on each side that will talk about it and adapt this strategy, the support will grow."

The idea has stronger support among the young, said Khalil Shikaki, a Palestinian pollster, particularly students and professionals who have clamored for a change in strategy since the Arab Spring in 2011.

"I'm 24," said Mariam Barghouti, a writer and activist involved in one of the one-state efforts, and a distant relation of Mustafa Barghouti.

"All I've known is Oslo and the two-state negotiation process. I've witnessed how it's only gotten worse for me and my generation."

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Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)

"One state solution gains traction among Palestinians." *Gulf News* [United Arab Emirates], 7 Jan. 2018. *Global Issues In Context*, http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A521691313/GIC?u=mlln_s_hinghigh&sid=GIC&xid=5ab3d6cc. Accessed 30 May 2018.

Gale Document Number: GALE|A521691313