What a one-state solution really means

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Some ideas, wrote George Orwell, are so absurd that you can only get the intellectuals to believe in them.

Today, the idea of the one-state solution - the creation of a single state in which Israelis and Palestinians, Christians, Muslims and Jews would live in peace as equal citizens between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea - is on the march.

Colonel Gaddafi called for one state of "Isratine" in 2003. In 2004, imprisoned Fatah politician Marwan Barghouti argued for Palestinians to quit the peace process and fight for equal rights instead - the "citizenship idea" as the UK academic one-stater Ghada Karmi puts it. In 2005, another western academic, Virginia Tilley, wrote The One State Solution, the first serious scholarly look at the idea (it was subject to a devastating critique by John Strawson in the online journal Democratiya). Ali Abunimah, the creator of the website Electronic Intifada, followed up a year later with One Country: A Bold Proposal to End the Israel-Palestine Impasse.

Soon enough the idea became the implicit programme of the global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement and the true meaning of its slogan "Free Palestine!" By 2007, one-state activists and intellectuals were holding conferences in Madrid and London and issuing a One-State Declaration. The year 2009 saw ex-US President Jimmy Carter and a group of "Elders" including Desmond Tutu and Mary Robinson making noises about the one-state solution and shortly afterwards conferences were being held at Harvard University. Sari Nusseibeh, the widely respected president of Al-Quds University, contributed the book, What is a Palestinian State Worth? in 2011.

In a major departure, he asked "if we were granted all the civilian rights needed for a normal life… then what need would we have for a separate national state?" And, in 2012, the Liberal Democrat deputy leader Simon Hughes declared the two-state solution (all but) dead and seemed to call for a "Plan B": a single state (he has since back-tracked).

Mind you, there are also Israeli voices proposing various forms of the one-state idea. From the left, there is Avraham Burg, former speaker of the Knesset, Ha'aretz columnist Carlo Strenger, and the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions. More significantly, the current Knesset speaker Reuven Rivlin, ex-Minister of Defence Moshe Arens, and Uri Elitzur, former chairman of the Yesha Council of Settlements and Benjamin Netanyahu's bureau chief in his first term, have all called for the annexation of Judea and Samaria and the granting of citizenship to all its residents.

Elitzur said: "The worse solution is probably the right one. A bi-national state, full annexation, full citizenship." Even parts of the US conservative right are now one-staters. The Republican National Committee in February passed a resolution calling
for "a united Israel governed under one law for all people" while the South Carolina and Florida legislatures have passed one-state resolutions.

The Israeli Ambassador to the UK, Daniel Taub, pointed out that Hughes was "playing into the hands of extremists" by advocating an approach that would "signal the end of the Jewish homeland". Here are four reasons why he was right and Hughes should think again:

- 'One-statism' rests on five flawed arguments

The arguments demonise Zionism as a movement and Israel as a state. First, the one-staters reduce to an absurd caricature - and so demonise - Zionism as a movement in order to delegitimise Israel as a state and Israelis as a people. They deny Zionism's character as a national liberation movement and frame it as a nothing but a "settler-colonial project", racist to boot. In the jargon, the one-staters offer a "keyhole history" - distorting a very complex past by viewing it through a very simplistic prism. The Jews of Israel are seen as a tainted people born in sin and they do not deserve national self-determination.

Second, the one-staters insist the two-state solution is dead. They say there are too many settlers who can't be moved (ignoring the fact that in any recent serious negotiation some 70-80 per cent of settlements end up inside Israel proper, with the Palestinians being compensated by land swaps); too little political will to move settlers (ignoring the removal by the Israel government of settlers from the Sinai, Gaza and the West Bank); too many Israeli security demands and resource needs that deny Palestinian sovereignty (as if the threats were just a case of "national mytho-history" as Virginia Tilley has it); and too much Israeli intransigence. "Israel has resisted every call for a settlement based on the two-state solution" argues Ghada Karmi, ignoring Jewish and then Israeli commitments to divide the land in 1937, 1947, 1967, 2000 and 2007-8, to mention but a few dates.

Third, the two-state solution is declared to be unjust, even if it is feasible. Tilley argues the two-state solution is "ethically inadequate" because it ignores "the very human-rights principles that elsewhere legitimise, empower and guide international action". She means it would create a Bantustan, deny justice to the refugees and leave Israel as an "ethnocracy" not a democracy, because Israeli Arabs can only be second-class citizens in a Jewish state.

Fourth, the one-staters treat Palestinian revanchist hopes to reclaim all the land and Palestinian rejectionism of the Jewish state as forms of progressive thinking. Conversely, they abuse as "collaborationists" and "sell-outs" those figures within the Palestinian national movement, such as Salam Fayyad, who seek compromise, peace, and a Little Palestine alongside what American intellectual Michael Walzer calls a Little Israel. Typical of this ridiculous policing of the Palestinian national movement from the left - from Exeter University in this case - is Ilan Pappé, the anti-Zionist Israeli academic now teaching in the UK. He rejects the two-state solution as "a concept of peace that buries 1948 and its victims" and praises Yasir Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas because "[both] withdrew from the [peace] process twice at the last moment; ultimately because they could not betray the Palestinian Right of Return".
Pappé sums up his version of one-statism in five words: "acknowledgment, accountability, return - and closure".

The Israeli academic Asher Susser drew out the practical political meaning of one-statism in his 2012 book Israel, Jordan and Palestine: The Two-State Imperative. "The two-state paradigm began to give way to two complementary developments: the South Africanisation of the discourse on Israel-Palestine, on the one hand; and an intensive campaign waged in the Palestinian diaspora on the sanctity of the right of return on the other. The one-state solution and refugee return to Israel proper were essentially two sides of the same coin." From the Palestinian side of the argument, the US-born Palestinian academic Saree Makdisi admits that "most of the advocates [for the one-state solution] are increasingly clustered around the still-developing BDS movement".

• 'One state' is anti-democratic

The two peoples don't want the one-state solution. In 2012, a Gallup poll found that two thirds of Israelis and Palestinians still want the two-state solution. One-staters simply ignore this. The late Tony Judt famously used the pages of the New York Review of Books to invite Israel to give up its "anachronistic" attachment to the nation-state. After all, it was so last century, and at odds with universal democratic values. One-staters on the other side are no better. Makdisi writing in After Zionism: One State for Israel and Palestine expressed his disdain for "those Palestinians who cling to what is manifestly an outmoded form of political thought… centred on the nation-state".

This is all nonsense. Actually, we have just lived through a purple patch when it comes to creating ethno-states. They proliferated as the Soviet Union splintered, as Yugoslavia broke up and, for goodness sake, even the Velvet Underground-loving hipsters of Czechoslovakia went for the two-state solution. Where are the calls for the dissolution of these anachronistic ethno-nationalist obscenities? And where are the urgent pleas to the Kurds, the Tibetans and the Kashmiris to put aside their reactionary dreams of self-determination?

So why only the Jews? The leading one-stater Ali Abunimeh supplies the answer: "self-determination… cannot apply to Israelis as a separate group due to the settler colonial nature of Zionism."

As the left-wing Israeli writer Gadi Taub has said about the one-state stronghold of The London Review of Books, it is in London that the old colonial habits of mind are dying hard. "The natives - we Jews and Arabs - aspire to national self-determination. But the good 'ol Brits, never tired of carrying the White Man's Burden, know that the natives are too barbaric to understand what the right form of self-determination should be for them."

• 'One state' is politically impossible

Reading the 255 pages of After Zionism; One State for Israel and Palestine, I found precisely 20 lines about what a single state would look like (think Lebanon). The one-state literature offers little but gestures and wishful thinking. Here is a sample of one-
state wisdom: "the dismantling of Israel and its replacement by something new" (Ghada Karmi); "a state promising justice for all its citizens" (Anthony Loewenstein); "it would resolve the entire conflict in one magisterial gesture" (Virginia Tilley); "a multicultural society perhaps on the Canadian model" (Halper and Epstein); "we will have to look deeply [at] confederate structures as in Switzerland, Canada and Belgium" (Carlo Strenger) and "there is every reason to expect a peaceful transition following the South African model" (Michael Breen).

Now and then, there is clarity: "It would mean abandoning the original Zionist vision of a Jewish state, since the Palestinians would eventually outnumber the Jews," says John J Mearsheimer. Sometimes, there is even clear-thinking: "[There is a] dearth of ideas for its implementation. No one has come up with a blueprint for the new state or produced a road-map of how to get there" (Karmi).

- 'One state' can be a cover for the old goal of conquest

The fools do not propose one state with the intention of conquest. But the knaves do. And the knaves run the BDS movement. Writing in a new collection After Zionism: One State for Israel and Palestine, Omar Barghouti, a founder of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) and the BDS movement, rejects any expression of Jewish self-determination whatsoever because "by definition it infringes the inalienable rights of the indigenous Palestinian to part of their homeland". You can't be much plainer than that.

The idea of conquest lies only just beneath the surface of one-state discourse. Listen to Makdisi, an English professor at UCLA. "No privileged group in the history of the world has ever voluntarily renounced its privileges… the Israelis will never relinquish their privileges until they are compelled (his italics) preferable by non-violent means… to accept the parameters of a single democratic state." But Israel will never volunteer to dissolve itself, and Makdisi knows this, so his talk of non-violence is mere throat-clearing.

The one-state solution also gets wrong what the conflict is actually about. Two highly developed and distinct societies, Israeli and Palestinian, each based on a powerful sense of national identity, must divide the land. When there are strong desires for national self-determination the one-state idea collapses. Brit Shalom, the bi-national Zionist movement of the 1920s could not know this. We can't not know it.

To divide the land each people needs to feel confident and secure if it is to make excruciating compromises. For that, each people must feel itself to be understood as a permanent feature of the Middle East. One-statism does the opposite. It proposes to resolve a national question by denying the right to national self-determination of both peoples. As Leon Wieseltier wrote in The New Republic back in 2003: "The one-state solution is not the alternative for Israel. It is the alternative to Israel."