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To Achieve One State, Palestinians Must Also Work for Two

By: Nadia Hijab · February, 2018

In the wake of US President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, reinforced by Vice President Mike Pence's promise to move the US embassy before the end of 2019, there has been a flurry of pieces heralding the imminent shift in a Palestinian strategy toward a one-state solution with equal rights. Both Palestinian negotiators closely involved in the moribund Oslo peace process and Palestinians who have long since despaired of Oslo declared that it is time to transform the struggle. Meanwhile, Israel continued to expand settlements, crack down on protests, and plan annexation of some or all of the West Bank.

Is the two-state solution really doomed, and is it time to move to a struggle for a single state? This commentary will argue that either state outcome can be made to achieve Palestinian aspirations and rights, and that, moreover, fulfilling Palestinian rights requires some of the sources of power associated with the state system. It will also urge that time and energy be spent on clarifying Palestinian goals and understanding why they have not yet been achieved, and then zeroing in on the sources of power needed to achieve them. The final section will discuss one of those sources of power in detail, that of the Palestinian narrative, and will call for a reframing of that narrative, including the narrative around BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions).[1]

Palestinian Goals in One-State and Two-State Outcomes

The goal of the Palestinian struggle continues to be expressed in terms of state structures. Yet in terms of achieving Palestinian rights, what would a one-state political outcome achieve that two states would not? It is worth briefly examining each outcome. 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. A single state is closely tied to the right of the refugees to return to their homes and lands.

Through a single state Palestinians would exercise their right to self-determination by returning to and living in the entirety of the land that had been Palestine, alongside the Jews living there, with equal rights for all. While the 1968 PLO charter spoke of the Jews who had resided in Palestine before the Zionist conquest resulted in the creation of Israel, present Palestinian advocates of a one-state solution recognize that it must encompass all its inhabitants.

As for the two-state solution, it is important to distinguish between the vision expressed in 1988, when the Palestinian National Council (PNC) adopted it, and the truncated, economically and politically crippled travesty of justice set out in the Oslo Accords that began to be signed in 1993. When it was adopted in 1988, the two-state solution was seen as a pragmatic, doable recognition of reality. Palestinians would exercise the right to self-determination through a sovereign state that would secure the rights of its citizens. Such a state would enable Palestine to join the community of nations. Further, the 1988 PNC resolution upheld the UN resolutions regarding the rights of the Palestinian refugees. And the struggle for two states does not mean forsaking the vital struggle for equality of the Palestinian citizens of Israel.

Oslo doomed a rights-based state project from the start. On the Palestinian side, the acceptance of the Accords included an implicit assumption that Palestinian

refugee rights would be severely circumscribed, thus sacrificing a core Palestinian right. On the Israeli side, there was never any intention of allowing a sovereign Palestinian state to emerge alongside Israel. Yitzhak Rabin, heralded as the great peacemaker, made it clear soon after the first Oslo agreement that he intended to ensure that Palestinians would have no more than an entity that was "less than a state," with Israel's security border located in the Jordan Valley. Those positions carried through the years of negotiations. Israeli positions have greatly hardened since: Most recently, the Likud Central Committee unanimously voted to call on the party's leaders to annex the West Bank.

Had the two-state solution stayed close to its original framing, it could have fulfilled Palestinian rights to self-determination and return, just as the one-state would have, if the Palestinians had been able to build enough power to ensure that Israel would respect the right of return and equal rights in one state, and the right of return and sovereignty in two states.

The reality today is that the Palestinian people have no power to achieve either outcome in the foreseeable future and to impose the recognition and implementation of their rights on Israel or on the international community. In fact, the Palestinian leadership, believing that Oslo was leading to a Palestinian state, let the sources of power that it had accumulated in the 1970s and 1980s dissipate, including a vibrant solidarity movement and strong relationships with the countries of the South, the Soviet Union, and China.

PLO President Mahmoud Abbas has not declared the end of the two-state solution and clearly hopes that the Europeans will step in now that he has, perhaps temporarily, washed his hands of the US. However, asking European states to serve as mediators will not move the Palestinian cause forward. There is nothing to mediate: The Israelis have made their goals clear; the best the Palestinians can hope for is disconnected Bantustans. One worst-case scenario would be for a "deal" that would appear to fulfill some Palestinian rights after

which the world would go home, leaving the Palestinians at Israel's mercy. No one will do anything for the Palestinian people – not the Europeans, or the US, or Israel – unless they are pressured to do so.

In short, Palestinians will need to build considerable power to exercise the pressure needed to achieve a solution that would guarantee their rights. And to do so they will need some of the sources of power that they have acquired through membership in the state system, whether legal, diplomatic, or through participation in international organizations. However, those sources of power must be used far more effectively and strategically than in the superficial way that the PLO has used them. Even the hard-fought membership of UNESCO, which cost that organization dearly, could have been used to establish Palestinian sovereignty on land and sea.

Moreover, imagine the different situation today if the PLO had "activated" the 2004 International Court of Justice ruling on Israel's illegal wall that snakes through the OPT. Although it was an advisory opinion, its clear call on all states not to "recognize the illegal situation resulting from the construction of the wall" and, more importantly, not to provide any aid or assistance that could maintain that situation, could have been used to push rules-conscious European countries into much more decisively ensuring that their relations with Israel did not support the illegal Israeli settlements.

It is because the PLO did not capitalize on what a member of the Palestinian delegation privately described at the time as this "great win" that Palestinian civil society, exactly a year later, launched the BDS movement, with the clear aim of upholding international law and putting a major source of power behind it.

The road ahead is long. No one is in any rush to help Palestinians fulfill their rights. So there is no rush to decide on the ultimate political outcome: Either could work so long as it fulfills Palestinian rights. This was the smart, strategic approach of the

BDS movement's founders. Given the disarray of the national movement and the lack of consensus around political goals, the founders focused instead on rights as goals, calling for the realization of self-determination through freedom from occupation, equality for the Palestinian citizens of Israel, and justice for the Palestinian refugees in fulfilling their right of return. This enabled the movement to reach the broadest spectrum of Palestinian society as well as of international solidarity activists – and to build a considerable source of power.

Every source of power available should be analyzed and understood for what it has to offer, its strengths and its pitfalls, and Palestinian civil society should ally with the PLO (or what is left of it) whenever possible to advance Palestinian national interests and to oppose Palestinian political representatives when they place those interests in danger.[2] In the discussion below I will focus on one major source of power, the Palestinian narrative, and ways in which it can be more effectively used to advance Palestinian rights.

Getting the Narrative Right on Palestine (and on BDS)

Part of the Palestinian narrative has to do with the past, and part has to do with the goals of the Palestinian struggle and is more forward-looking. The forward-looking part remains muted and insufficiently effective, while that of the past is fully fleshed out.

The narrative of the past is, for Palestinians, an existential matter: They are determined that the reality of what happened to Palestine and to the Palestinians be seen for the injustice that it was. This is why so much time was spent during the 100th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration last year on demanding an apology from Britain, whose colonial aims enabled the loss of Palestine and the creation of Israel. And this is why so much time will be spent this year, the 70th anniversary of the Nakba (catastrophe), on that narrative of loss.

An apology from Britain might have sufficed but it was never in the cards: Former colonial powers do not want to tarnish their own narratives, as horrible as they were, or to lay themselves open to demands for reparations. But the situation differs in the case of Israel. If there is to be a different, better future between Israel and the people of historic Palestine there needs to be not only recognition of the injustice that the Zionist project visited on the Palestinians, but also an expression of regret, and reparations. These are necessary to heal the national wound of the Palestinian people and of every Palestinian person.

It may seem quixotic to speak of this demand at a time when Israel appears so powerful and Palestinians so crushed and helpless. And yet recognition, regret, and reparations are also needed to exorcise the ghost that haunts Israelis. There is a deep-seated fear that the narrative underpinning the creation of the Israeli state – that of brave pioneers establishing wonders in a hostile and empty desert – will be exposed for the sham it was, as will all the deliberate cruelty that accompanied it and still does. This would undermine the Zionist project at its core.

In fact, moving beyond this narrative is far from impossible: It has been achieved by the many Jews who are moving or have moved from the ideology of Zionism to upholding universal human rights. And it is the basis for an alternative future in which Palestinians and Jews live together as equals. That future is already here in some organizations in the United States, such as the fast-growing Jewish Voice for Peace, which includes several Palestinians amongst its membership, as well as Students for Justice in Palestine groups across US campuses, which include Palestinians, Jews, and a mix of other ethnicities and religions.

But the Palestinians badly need a forward-looking narrative that unifies them and that communicates the power of their vision. Israel continues to dominate the narrative in the West, where it has most of its power base, despite inroads made by Palestinian writers and analysts and by numerous organizations and individuals in the Palestine solidarity movement. It is partly the lack of a unified forward-

looking and positive vision by Palestinians that enables Israel to do this.

Moreover, a forward-looking narrative can provide a vision and direction for the Palestinian movement until the time comes when a decision is made as to whether the political outcome could be one state or two. A unifying narrative is also important because it is unlikely that Palestinian political unity will be achieved in the foreseeable future. Fatah and Hamas are too far apart, and Israel's physical fragmentation of the Palestinian people has successfully created barriers between them. A unifying narrative would enable all parts of the Palestinian people to work toward the same goals – and to keep up the struggle until those goals are achieved, rather than stopping halfway along the road as happened with Oslo.

That unifying Palestinian narrative already exists: Freedom, Justice, Equality. These are the goals identified by the BDS movement. These are also goals that all Palestinians can aspire to and support, and they speak to the reality of each segment of the Palestinian people, whether those living under occupation, the Palestinian citizens of Israel, or the refugees and exiles. There is a pitfall to be avoided: In calling for equality, every care must be taken to specify that this relates to the Palestinian citizens of Israel and not to equality between Palestinians living under occupation and the settlers living in Israel's illegal settlements.

However, for these goals to successfully take their place at the forefront of the Palestinian national movement, the discourse around BDS must be reframed. Currently, the focus is on the BDS strategy and not on the goals identified in the BDS call, even though they are featured at the top of its website. By itself the BDS strategy cannot achieve freedom, justice, and equality, as its founders are well aware. Yet because none of the other strategies are as effectively used and advanced as that of BDS, it dominates the scene. Care should be taken to present BDS as one of many strategies that the Palestinians must use, including legal and diplomatic ones. Culture and the arts also play a key role in the quest for

Palestinian rights, and they are thriving.

It is urgent that the goals be placed front and center: They are an uplifting and positive vision that can quickly occupy the high ground. Palestinian politicians, civil society, and the solidarity movement should unify around and call for Freedom, Justice and Equality. And freedom, justice, and equality can be achieved in one state or two.

1. Some of the material in this paper was presented in a talk at the Palestine Solidarity Campaign annual meeting on January 27, 2018. The talk was published by Mondoweiss on January 31, 2018.
2. Palestinian sources of power and options are the subject for a different piece with input from numerous analysts (I have touched on it briefly here).

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