

Why Optimism About the Prospects of the Two-State Solution Is Justified

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The results of the Israeli elections are adding to the fatalistic attitude prevalent in the Israeli public and in the international arena regarding the chances of saving Israel from a binational catastrophe. Every day I hear the skeptical voices of people who don't understand why I devote most of my energy to promoting initiatives and ideas to end the occupation, which I see as the most significant danger to the future of the State of Israel. In this article I will deal with refuting the skeptical approach.

My answer is based on an empirical analysis of the reality I recognize in the Israeli public, the Palestinian public, the regional and international arenas, and American politics. There is also a psychological component that I will not deal with in this article, but it is important to mention: No one can predict the future in an era of exponential (nonlinear) change that the human mind cannot understand. Therefore, choosing optimism is a strategic choice, because despite our inability to predict the future, the only way to influence it is by combining a critical mind with a hopeful heart. Despair is not a work plan, and the future belongs to those who have the energy to act and proactively propose initiatives. It is impossible to mobilize such energy without hope and without an effective action plan. We saw how the hopeful mobilization of the Balfour protesters on bridges and squares across the country succeeded in changing reality in a way that led to the establishment of "the government of change" and Netanyahu's removal from the powers of government.

Contrary to skepticism about the chances of reaching a two-state solution, all polls show that the majority of the Israeli public prefers separation from the Palestinians over any other alternative. The alternative in which two communities of almost equal size located between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea and which have been in violent conflict for many decades will live in a common state seems to most Israelis to be a catastrophe, and rightly so. On the other hand, a deep and widespread

distrust in the feasibility of the two-state solution has taken root in the Israeli public. The prevailing attitude is an acceptance of the false spin that we have no partner, which has been rooted in the public since the failure of Camp David 2000, has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. In retrospect, it is clear that the objective of reaching an agreement at Camp David without a regional envelope was far-fetched, but the failure led to a lack of confidence regarding the possibility of solving the main issues of the conflict: security, settlements, refugees, and Jerusalem.

In order to close the gap between plurality in support for the two-state solution and the lack of confidence in its feasibility, there is a need for a leadership that will guide the State of Israel to a place that will secure its future and preserve its values. We have seen in the past how Prime Minister Menachem Begin, who was elected on the basis of declarations against any territorial compromise, won the support of the majority of the public when he

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decided to give up the Sinai Peninsula and evacuate the Israeli settlements in favor of peace with the Egyptians. We saw how former Prime Minister Sharon, who was elected on the basis of the slogan “that Gaza and Tel Aviv are the same,” won the support of the majority of the public in his decision to evacuate the settlements and the IDF from the Gaza Strip.

It is clear that today the majority of the Israeli public votes on the basis of other issues, because they have no sense of urgency regarding the end of the occupation. This also includes many of Prime Minister Yair Lapid’s voters, who in principle are in favor of a move to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but treat the issue as they have treated climate change for years - namely, as a matter that does not require immediate action. Another part of the public fears the internal rift that will be created if a decision is made to evacuate many settlements, and others simply do not believe that separating from the Palestinians will improve our security situation in the short term — and they choose not to think about the long term. I believe that a leadership move that will change reality will be supported by the majority of the public, but the public is not pushing its leaders to engage in this now for the reasons listed above. Therefore, the change has to come from somewhere else.

Peace with Egypt Did Not Start with an Israeli initiative

As we know, the dramatic change that led to peace with Egypt did not start with an Israeli initiative but rather a courageous move by an Egyptian

leader who had already indirectly made the same offer to Prime Minister Golda Meir even before the Yom Kippur War but was ignored, and that is why we experienced the trauma of the war. President Sadat's move would not have been possible without Egypt's transition from a Soviet orientation to an American one and without the proactive diplomatic support of the Carter administration in the negotiations and, after the agreement, in the U.S. aid arrangements for Egypt and Israel. The same phenomenon happened in the initiation of the Madrid Peace Conference, which led to a dramatic change in Israel's relations with countries such as China, India, and Turkey and which led to the Oslo process, thanks to which Israel does not control the Palestinian cities. The Madrid Conference was not an initiative of Prime Minister Shamir, who was reluctantly dragged into it by Jim Baker, the U.S. secretary of state of the Bush administration. Baker was able to leverage the end of the Cold War and the success of the regional alliance led by the U.S. against the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in order to create an international effort to resolve the Palestinian issue. The move was not completed, but it demonstrated the American ability to lead a significant international move in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Ripeness for a Move on the Palestinian Issue Under American Leadership

I believe that in many respects there is currently a great ripeness for a regional and international move on the Palestinian issue under American leadership, which can provide answers to the four core issues of the conflict detailed above. The regional arena no longer sees Israel as the problem but sees it as part of the solution. This is a change that was manifested by the Arab Peace Initiative (API) of 2002; however, this groundbreaking initiative met with a lack of response from Israel. The initiative reflects the dramatic change that has taken place in the Arab world — a change whose deep meaning Israel failed to understand and derive action from. For years, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was perceived as serving the Arab leaders in order to divert the attention of their publics from the lack of civil rights and economic development. The change came when Arab leaders realized that Israel is a *fait accompli* and that the conflict mainly serves their Iranian and Sunni jihadist enemies. Therefore, they proposed the API to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to integrate Israel into the region. The suggested formula was the two-state solution based on the 1967 borders. (The initiative was later updated with the addition of the principle of the

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land swaps under pressure from John Kerry, the U.S. secretary of state in the Obama administration). It is important to dwell on the issue of the land swaps, because it has the potential to disprove the “too late” claim that there is no possibility of evacuating the approximately 650,000 Israelis who live beyond the Green Line. The principle of the exchange of territories allows about 80% of the settlers to remain in their homes and be included within the boundaries of the State of Israel within an agreed border. In this way, it will be possible to significantly reduce the number of settlers who will be forced to move to the territory of the State of Israel through evacuation and compensation (or who will remain within the territory of the Palestinian state, if so agreed) to orders of magnitude that will not constitute an impossible task for the State of Israel (see Shaul Arieli website <https://www.shaularieli.com/en/category/maps/>).

A solution to the Jerusalem issue also exists in the API, which recognizes Israel’s sovereignty in the west of the city but claims a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem. The city is already divided in practice, and this is in Israel’s interest, since there is no logic in our capital having an anti-Zionist majority without political rights and there is no reason why the Arab neighborhoods in the east of the city should not be part of the Palestinian capital. As for the Holy Basin, there will be a need for a creative solution of



Netanyahu, Obama and Abbas during a meeting in New York in 2009 (photo credit: Avi Ohayon/GPO/Flash90)

joint sovereignty that will include Israel, the Palestinians, a representative of the Islamic countries (Jordan), and a representative of the Vatican (see the Geneva Initiative website <https://geneva-accord.org/>).

In addition to this, the text of the API reflects an understanding that there will be no solution to the refugee issue that is not agreed upon by Israel and even gives it the right to veto its features. This approach, in which the Palestinians are not required to give up the fundamental right of return but understand that its realization within Israel requires Israeli consent and therefore will not be comprehensive, was agreed upon by the Palestinian side in all the negotiations since.

The issue of security is also solvable with a regional and international approach. The current Palestinian leadership has emphasized time and time again that they have no ambition to have their own army and have accepted the principle of a demilitarized Palestinian state. They demand that the Israeli army be replaced by an international or American force. During the Obama administration, General John Allen developed with the heads of the IDF an outline that includes the protection of Israel's eastern border through an American force, technological means that will allow Israel to monitor what is happening on the ground, and regional cooperation — mainly with Jordan and Egypt. Former IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot's recent words about the necessity to prevent the formation of a binational state represent the opinion of the large majority of senior IDF, Mossad, and Shin Bet officials who have completed their service and believe that Israel's security will increase as a result of a two-state solution (see website "Commanders for the Security of Israel" <http://en.cis.org.il/>).

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The Arab Peace Initiative and the Abraham Accords

The API has since been repeatedly confirmed at the Arab summits, including during difficult times. In Israel itself, the initiative did not attract public interest due to the lack of brave leadership and due to the fact that the promise of normalization was seen as a pipe dream without concrete meaning for the Israeli public. I see similarities between the incompetence and irresponsibility shown by Arab leaders in rejecting the UN partition proposal (1947) and the incompetence and irresponsibility toward the Israeli public demonstrated by Israel's leaders in their long-standing disregard for the Arab states' peace proposal (see the "Israel Initiative" website <https://www.yozmim.org/en>).

The Abraham Accords refuted a central claim of the opponents of the agreement with the Palestinians, according to which “the Arabs will never accept Israel.” Suddenly the Israelis began to enjoy the fruits of normalization. This includes a large majority of voters of right-wing parties, who in the past saw all Arabs as an enemy and today are flocking to Dubai and posing for pictures with traditional Arab outfits. The ability to fly over the airspace of Saudi Arabia excites the Israelis who long to fly to the Far East in a short time and at a cheap price. The fact that these agreements were led by the objects of admiration of the right - Trump and Netanyahu - strengthens the legitimacy of the change in right-wing public opinion and illustrates the fruits of peace with Arab countries.

On the other hand, as of today, the Abraham Accords set the stage for the claim that the Palestinians can be ignored and regional peace can be reached without them. Even if there is truth in the claim (and in my opinion it will become clear that the agreements cannot be isolated from the influence of events in the Israeli-Palestinian arena), it goes without saying that the process of regional normalization is blessed in itself but does not protect Israel from the disastrous results of the continuous slide into a bloody binational state.

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We know today that the Abraham Accords were originally intended to serve other purposes that did not include concern or interest in the Palestinian issue. Trump preferred to promote the so called “Deal of the Century peace plan” that is disconnected from reality, and Netanyahu dreamed of American endorsement of Israeli annexation of significant areas in the West Bank. However, when it became clear to Jared Kushner that there was no regional support for Trump’s plan if it included annexation, he proposed an alternative plan marketed to him by the talented Emirati Ambassador Al-Outaiba which was designed to prevent annexation and would give the Trump administration an alternative achievement in the form of the Abraham Accords. Trump, with his transactional business approach, was convinced that the deal should include a payment to the Emiratis in the form of F-35 planes, to the Sudanese by removing them from the terrorist lists, and to the Moroccans by recognizing their sovereignty over Western Sahara.

Although the Palestinians felt betrayed by the deal, like many cases in which the irony of history causes leaders to lead a change they did not intend, the Abraham Accords can provide an important infrastructure to advance the two-state solution. It must be understood that the United Arab

Emirates has the potential to influence the Israeli Government and public opinion even more than the European powers. It is clear that the Emirates and the other parties to the agreements do not give a high priority to the Palestinian issue, but they, too, are aware that the instability between Israel and the Palestinians may damage regional stability, especially when it comes to the symbols of Islam in Jerusalem, with an emphasis on Al-Aqsa Mosque. The countries in the region will not take a significant step in the Palestinian context, however, without American leadership and without American compensation in their bilateral relations and in defense against Iran and the Sunni jihadists.

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Opportunities for U.S. Leverage

As far as the United States is concerned, this is low-hanging fruit. There is a tremendous opportunity here for the United States, which falls in line with its desire to mobilize the energy-exporting countries of the region to influence the global economy, indirectly help pressure Russia, and improve Biden's position in the polls, which has been damaged by the rise in oil prices. The United States has an opportunity to promote its interests by deploying proactive diplomacy which will prevent Russia and China from taking advantage of the vacuum created by the U.S. withdrawal from a military presence in the Middle East. This situation gives the U.S. leverage to promote a solution to the Palestinian issue through diplomatic leadership in the Middle East without boots on the ground.

The same goes for the international arena, where promoting the two-state solution is a real opportunity for the U.S. There are not many issues where the U.S. can achieve a European, Russian, and Chinese consensus on a diplomatic move as it can by launching an initiative for a two-state solution. Apart from the governments of Iran and Israel, there is overwhelming support worldwide for the establishment of a Palestinian state, and Palestine can easily be accepted as a full member of the United Nations if the United States refrains from imposing a veto in the Security Council. This was recently confirmed in an article by Sven Koompans, the representative of the European Union for the peace process, in *Ha'aretz* 1.9) expressing unanimity among European countries regarding the sense of urgency to end the occupation. But as we know, the European Union cannot lead a significant move without American leadership due to structural problems and due to the unwillingness to use "leverages" on Israel.

A Peace Legacy for the Biden Administration

Of course, the question arises: What will cause the Biden administration or any U.S. Administration to return the Palestinian issue to the agenda? We saw that in its first two years, the Biden administration chose not to deal with the issue, despite its clear principled position in favor of the two-state solution. The reasons for this were the variety of issues he had on his plate in the international and domestic agenda. In this context, even Secretary of State Blinken's visit to the Negev Conference initiated by Foreign Minister Lapid or Biden's presidential visit to Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and Saudi Arabia did not take place in the context of the Palestinian issue and would not have taken place at all had it not been for the need to deal with energy prices and prepare for the consequences of an agreement or lack of an agreement with Iran, which was then approaching a decision point. This has been the case thus far, but there is no reason that it will have to be the case after the midterm elections in November.

The Biden administration has begun to realize that even if the Democrats will be relatively successful in the midterm elections, they will probably lose the majority in the House of Representatives and hence the era of being able to pass significant legislation in Congress. The arena where Biden will be able to create a legacy, especially if he does not run for president in 2024 due to his age, is in the field of foreign policy. In foreign policy, the president depends much less on lawmakers, and his success in strengthening NATO and Ukraine against Russia has proven to Biden that this is where he should focus. Biden is the most experienced president in foreign relations since Bush, Sr., and all he has to do is give his administration instructions to act. There are many senior officials in the administration who understand the need for American leadership in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, and they just need to hear that "the commander's spirit" is to act. Despite the need to engage with Russia and China, the American administration can walk and chew gum at the same time. The Biden administration has an ability to influence Israel that Obama did not have. He is seen as a friend and can push Israel and embrace it at the same time. The Biden administration can provide a political horizon that will make the two-state solution concrete for Israelis and help the PA strengthen its governance in the West Bank, which was eroded by the lack of hope. Biden will be able to achieve this if he addresses the people of Israel and makes it clear that the U.S. will not be able to diplomatically defend a nondemocratic regime in a binational situation and that the choice rests with Israel. He will be able to force Israelis to choose whether to be part of the liberal democratic civilization or not.

As for the American domestic political arena, here, too, there are reasons for optimism. The Republicans who became Trumpists, will attack Biden anyway, but the Democratic Party is now riper than ever to support a move on the Palestinian issue. For many years the party was influenced by the pro-status quo forces in the Jewish community. The new generation of legislators understands that it is for Israel's own good that the two-state solution should be promoted, as there are no military answers to the challenges that Israel faces. This tendency is growing, due to demographic changes, due to a generational change in the Jewish community, and also due to the increasing strength of the pro-Israel, pro-peace lobby.

The Discourse on Capitol Hill is Changing

I am proud to work for J Street, which has managed to completely change the discourse on Capitol Hill. During the time I served in Washington before the founding of J Street, lawmakers who talked about ending the occupation, about a Palestinian state, or even about human rights for Palestinians were considered politically suicidal, whereas today this is the discourse among the great majority of the Democratic Party. In the past, it was the White House that wanted to promote an agreement for reasons of American interests or for the benefit of winning a Nobel Prize, and Congress used to stop them from moving forward, whereas today the majority of Democrats in Congress will support and push for such a move.

Therefore, what should the U.S. Government do today? Beyond preventing any move that would complicate the achievement of the two-state solution and the protection of basic human rights, the U.S. Administration can and should create a political horizon that will change the discourse in Israeli politics and instill faith among the moderate Palestinians that there is hope. A political horizon will ensure that in the Palestinian elections that will eventually be held, the moderate pro-diplomacy forces will be empowered, while Hamas, which represents about 25% of Palestinian society, will return to its natural dimensions. The U.S. needs to mobilize the regional and international arena for a

move to recognize a Palestinian state, so that the Palestinian public will return to believing in reliable American leadership and so that the negotiations on the details of the agreement will start from a point of equality between the parties, even if only in a symbolic way, in contrast to the current situation where the disparity of power does not allow for serious negotiations. In addition, the administration must define a number of basic

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parameters for the negotiations so as not to start from scratch again. These parameters should be in the spirit of the API, the road map of the Bush, Jr. administration, and the principles published by former Secretary of State Kerry at the end of the Obama administration's term. A demand must be placed on the Palestinians to hold elections at the end of which they will have one political address for both the West Bank and Gaza, which will gain internal and international legitimacy. Contrary to the right-wing spin and despite occasional unfortunate statements by President Abbas, the PA under his leadership makes many efforts against terrorism, but it has been weakened dramatically because, among other reasons, the approach that prefers diplomacy has not been rewarded by Israel. On the contrary, during the years of Netanyahu's rule, many efforts were made to weaken the PA, to distinguish between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and to keep Hamas strong enough so that we can say there is no partner.

I do not minimize the difficulties and obstacles that the opponents of the agreement on both sides will put up. To overcome the obstacles, what is required is a clear strategy, mobilization of a regional and international coalition to support it, and the determination to implement it. Therefore, the peace camp in Israel and the pro-peace American Jewish community must abandon the melancholy that characterizes them and start working to promote their beliefs and values. Anyone who wants Israel to be a model state of *Tikun Olam* and humanistic values should roll up their sleeves and start working to make it happen.

Such a move is both possible and necessary for the future of Israel and the entire region, and if not now, when?