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Editorial: Israel/Palestine: the one-state reality implications and dynamics

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Editorial on the Research Topic

[Israel/Palestine: the one-state reality implications and dynamics](#)

For several decades, observers of and commentators on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict performed what may be called the one-state, two-state tango. Repeatedly, advocates of a “one-state solution” emphasized rightful claims and genuine national attachments that could not be honored unless both Jews and Palestinians had full and equal access to all the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Two-staters responded by decrying the one-staters’ inability to offer a plausible plan for achieving such an outcome. They stressed that partition of the country into two-states, one controlled by Palestinians and the other by Jews, had reasonable chances of being attained since it promised to meet at least the minimum requirements of both peoples for refuge and national self-determination.

But ever since the collapse of the Oslo process more than 20 years ago, things have changed. Every diplomatic effort to restart negotiations has failed and a decade has passed since the last attempt to restart them. Three quarters of a million Israelis now live in the West Bank, including expanded East Jerusalem. The Gaza Strip is a gigantic, immiserated Israeli prison. Whether, and if so how, a two-state solution can be achieved are questions that have disappeared, not only from conversations among pundits and researchers, but also from the political agendas of both Israelis and Palestinians. One-staters and two-staters no longer battle over who has the right “solution” to the conflict. Their fight has ended, not with the realization of either solution, but with the crystallization of a reality—the one-state reality.

As a template for studying and thinking about the present and future of the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, and of the people and peoples who live there, the one-state reality is now gaining ascendancy, not as a solution, but as the fundamental circumstance governing the lives all who live in the country and shaping the struggles they undertake and the strategies they adopt. It is not a simple picture. Israel does not rule territories inside the 1949 armistice lines with the same techniques it uses across those lines. Its domination of the life of Gazans does not take the same shape as its domination of the lives of inhabitants of East Jerusalem, or Nablus, or Jenin. Neither do Israelis in Shilo or Har Bracha or Hebron live according to the same norms or are governed by the same authorities as within the green line. Even there, within the portions of the country Israel has ruled since 1948, rampant crime and murderous violence in Arab communities show that Israeli governance standardly involves the application of different norms, different strategies, and different practices in different zones and to different populations within those zones.

It bears emphasizing that as a paradigm for thinking about the present and future of Israeli-Palestinian relations, the success of one-state reality thinking is based on the exhaustion of old approaches to the conflict between Jews and Arabs in Palestine/Israel, *not* on presentation of any new blueprint for a solution to that conflict. Indeed, the one-state reality approach abjures the fetishization of “solutions” or “models” of satisfying outcomes. Absent any plausible plan for realizing an agreed upon solution, these models remain but pretty pictures. Detailed discussion of them may reassure some that their values might be theoretically satisfiable. But too much attention to blueprints for the future, rather than to immediate sources of oppression, can obstruct efforts to mitigate the brutality of the present situation and conceal incentives and opportunities to move toward better problems.

Instead, the growing influence of the one-state reality paradigm is due to the opportunities it offers for focusing on what matters and what is interesting and instructive, not on questions or arguments traditionally seen as crucial for advancing, or blocking, a two-state solution. The one-state reality concept helps pose, and address, questions that are much more stimulating than can be posed or addressed based on images of the West Bank and Gaza as separate from the State of Israel. What is now required is work that breaks the intellectual shackles that have constrained scholars and policy-makers to think and operate within assumptions of the eventual separation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip from Israel. Such assumptions became a Procrustean bed that has discouraged understanding of how occupations can end, not only through the separation of the territories from the state that rules them, but via a more complete and ultimately transformative absorption of them into that state.

As we emphasized in our call for papers for this project, there are major, and until recently largely unrecognized, implications of the disappearance of a negotiated two-state solution as a credible object of policy by any major actor. It does not matter much whether this reality is understood as the product of American policy, the power of the Israel lobby, Israeli security imperatives, the domination of Israeli political and cultural life by the right-wing, the disappearance of a credible Palestinian negotiating partner, the density of Israeli settlement throughout the West Bank, or the weakness of international institutions. What matters is that things have drastically changed and, as is common in any domain of human investigation, the scale of change has far outrun the conceptual and theoretical tools used for analysis, explanation, prediction, and policy guidance.

The purpose of our work here has been to leverage the perspectives available within a one- (non-democratic)-state reality paradigm to encourage new ways of thinking, new questions, and new problem statements.

The collection of articles published by *Frontiers* under the rubric of “*Israel/Palestine: The one-state reality, implications and dynamics*,” is an early, but important effort to illustrate and advance this kind of research. Six articles have been published. Together they show how pervasive has been the impact of the one-state reality, requiring new questions to be posed, new thinking to be done, and new concepts and theories to be mobilized, across multiple domains of importance to Israelis and

Palestinians. The articles, listed below, explore the implications of the one-state reality for understanding the fundamental nature of the Israeli polity, for explaining trends and problems in right-wing Israeli political discourse, for analyzing Israel’s legal order from citizenship, international, and human rights perspectives, for appreciating the stresses to which European Union policies toward the conflict have been subjected, for how peace activists on both sides of the conflict are thinking differently about agendas and strategies, and for how policies of apartheid are changing so as to entrench Jewish unity against a much larger Palestinian population.

The articles in this Research Topic are listed below alphabetically by author along with brief descriptions of their main arguments. Together they illustrate the value of our main contention—that scholars and analysts are now responsible, not for refereeing debates between one and two-staters, or for arguing about whether there is more than one state between the river and the sea, but for exploring and deepening our understanding of the consequences and opportunities for change associated with the reality of one, non-democratic state, ruling the lives of all who live in the country some call Palestine and some call Israel.

Jamal, “*Jewish sovereignty and the inclusive exclusion of Palestinians: shifting the conceptual understanding of politics in Israel/Palestine*” (November 2022).

Comparative analysis of Israel’s Declaration of independence in 1948 and the Nation-State Law of 2018 show how the one-state reality both has shaped and is reflected in the operational meanings given to political theory questions about relationships among sovereignty, the status of Jewish vs. non-Jewish inhabitants, and the expansion of majoritarian mechanisms of differentiation, segregation, and control.

Lustick, “*Annexation in right-wing Israeli discourse—the case of Ribonut*” (September 2022).

The one-state reality has dramatically changed what the Israeli settler movement and the array of right-wing politicians and supporters of annexation argue about. Rather than focusing as they have for decades on how best to expand settlements and thwart diplomatic efforts, they now argue, without being able to reach consensus, on how to enforce and consolidate Jewish supremacy when Jews comprise less than half the population under Israel’s control.

Samuel, “*The Palestinian human right to full Israeli citizenship: between settler colonialism and a hard place*” (December 2022).

The one-state reality means that more non-citizen Palestinian Arabs live under effective Israeli rule than Palestinian Arabs who are Israeli citizens. That calls for a re-examination of how law functions in a state founded by settler colonialists and considers whether citizenship for all inhabitants of such a state is a human right.

Strömbom and Persson, “*The two-state impasse in Israel/Palestine and the EU*” (June 2023).

Throughout the past five decades, the EU has been strongly committed to first Palestinian self-rule and then a two-state solution, investing more political and financial resources in Palestinian self-rule than any other third party involved in the conflict. That investment now seems to be in jeopardy because of continued Israeli settlement expansion and intra-Palestinian

divisions. Factors influencing the EU to continue its support of the two-state solution are Palestinian interests in upholding the PA, the EU's security interests in the region, and fear of being associated with antisemitism. Factors pushing against these traditional EU policies are the increasing frailty of the PA and a mounting human rights discourse on equal rights for two peoples. While EU policymakers remain publicly committed to the two-state solution, the reality of its unattainability strains their beliefs, disturbs their private discourse, and is making them increasingly open to new ways to think about how their values can best be pursued in the context of Palestinian-Israeli relations.

Shemer-Kunz, "*Israel Palestine: annexation, normalization and the two-state solution*" (April 2023).

Interviews with Israeli and Palestinian political leaderships show how these two groups see the one-state reality on the ground and the way forward. Mainstream opinion among Israeli Jews is to normalize the status quo. Palestinians refuse the normalization of what they see as deepening apartheid. Palestinians, as well as anti-occupation Israelis, still cling to a two-state solution, but only as a challenge to the oppressive one-state reality. In the long run, Israelis envision a gradual acceptance of the one-state reality by the Palestinians, promising them economic and social rights, but without full equality with Israeli Jews. Palestinians see their future as a long struggle against the occupation and apartheid. The article also points to the emergence of ideas of a partnership-based peace based on equal rights and self-determination for both national groups rather than territorial partition.

Yiftachel, "*Deepening apartheid: the political geography of colonizing Israel/Palestine*" (January 2023).

Consolidation of the one-state reality has led Israel to systematize and generalize apartheid-like practices of systematic discrimination toward Palestinian Arabs while "whitening" Mizrahi and other Jewish groups. The idea of Israel as a state that is "Jewish and democratic" is analyzed as camouflage for the unfolding of the oppressive logics of settler colonialism, ethnocracy, and supremacist Zionism.

Author contributions

Both authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

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