

Liberal Zionism Begins to Make the Journey Towards a One-state Solution

Peter Beinart, a bellwether for American Jews, has provoked a storm by renouncing the two-state solution and urging equality for all

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Peter Beinart, an influential liberal commentator on Israel and Zionism, poked a very large stick into a hornets' nest this month by admitting he had finally abandoned his long-cherished commitment to a two-state solution.

Variously described as the “[pope of liberal Zionism](#)” and a “[bellwether](#) for the American Jewish community”, Beinart broke ranks in two essays. Writing in the New York Times and in Jewish Currents magazine, he embraced the idea of equality for all – Israelis and Palestinians.

Beinart [concluded](#):

“The painful truth is that the project to which liberal Zionists like myself have devoted ourselves for decades – a state for Palestinians separated from a state for Jews – has failed... It is time for liberal Zionists to abandon the goal of Jewish-Palestinian separation and embrace the goal of Jewish-Palestinian equality.”

Similarly, the NYT article was [headlined](#): “I no longer believe in a Jewish state.” Beinart’s main point – that a commitment to Israel is now entirely incompatible with a commitment to equality for the region’s inhabitants – is a potential hammer blow to the delusions of liberal Jews in the United States.

Long journey

His declaration is the apparent culmination of a long intellectual and emotional journey Beinart has conducted in the public eye. It’s a journey many American liberal Jews have taken with him.

Once the darling of the war-mongering liberal establishment in Washington, he supported the illegal attack on [Iraq in 2003](#). Three years later, he wrote a largely unrepentant book titled [The Good Fight: Why Liberals – and Only Liberals – Can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again](#).

There is no heavyweight publication in the US that has not hosted his thoughts. Foreign Policy magazine [ranked](#) him in the top 100 global thinkers in 2012.

But his infatuation with Israel and Zionism has been souring for years. A decade ago, he published a [seminal essay](#) on how young American Jews were increasingly alienated from their main leadership organisations, which he criticised for worshipping at the altar of Israel even as Israeli governments lurched ever further rightwards. His argument later formed the basis of a book, [The Crisis of Zionism](#).

The tensions he articulated finally exploded into physical confrontation in 2018, when he was [detained](#) at Israel's main airport and nearly denied entry based on his political views.

Beinart has not only written caustically about the occupation – a fairly comfortable deflection for most liberal Zionists – but has also increasingly turned his attention to Israel's [behaviour](#) towards its large Palestinian minority, one in five of the population.

Recognition of the structural racism towards these 1.8 million Palestinian citizens, a group whose identity is usually glossed over as “Israeli Arabs”, was a clear sign that he had begun poking into the dark recesses of Zionism, areas from which most of his colleagues shied away.

Disappointment and distrust

Beinart's two essays have been greeted with hesitancy by some of those who might be considered natural allies.

Understandably, some Palestinians find reason to distrust Beinart's continuing description of himself as a [Zionist](#), even if now a cultural rather than political one. They also [resent](#) a continuing western colonial mentality that very belatedly takes an interest in equality for Palestinians only because a prominent liberal Jew adopts the cause.

Beinart's language is problematic for many Palestinians too. Not least, he frames the issue as between Palestinians and Jews, implying that Jews everywhere still have a colonial claim on the historic lands of Palestine, rather than those who live there today as Israelis.

Similarly, among many anti-Zionists, there is disappointment that Beinart did not [go further](#) and explicitly prescribe a single democratic state of the kind currently being advanced in the region by small but growing numbers of Israelis and Palestinians.

Tested to breaking point

But the importance of Beinart's intervention lies elsewhere. The American is not the first prominent Jewish figure to publicly turn his back on the idea of a Jewish state. Notably, the late historian Tony Judt did the same – to much uproar – in a 2003 [essay](#) published by the New York Review of Books. He called Israel an “anachronism”.

But Judt had been chiefly associated with his contributions to understanding European history, not Zionism or Israel. And his essay arrived at a very different historical moment, when Israelis and Jews overseas were growing more entrenched in their Zionism. The Oslo Accords had fizzled into irrelevance at the height of a Palestinian uprising.

Beinart's articles have landed at a problematic time for his main audience. The most fundamental tenet of liberal Zionism – that a Jewish state is necessary, verging on sacred – is already being tested to the breaking point.

The trigger for the articles is the very tangible [threat](#) from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government, backed by the Trump White House, to annex swaths of the West Bank.

Meagre alibi lost

The significance of Netanyahu's position on annexation, as Israeli human rights lawyer Michael Sfard has [noted](#), depends not simply on whether annexation is realised on the ground, now or later. The declaration itself crosses a Rubicon.

Netanyahu and the right-wing faction who now control Israel unchallenged have made it explicit that they do not consider the occupation to be a temporary arrangement that will eventually be resolved in peace talks.



Image on the right is from Shutterstock

The intent to annex, whether or not the US allows such a move, now taints everything Israel does in the occupied territories. It proves beyond any doubt – even to liberal Jews who have been living in deep denial – that Israel's goal is to permanently seize the occupied territories.

That, in turn, means that Israel has only two possible approaches to the Palestinian populations living in those territories as long as it denies them equality: It can either carry out ethnic cleansing operations to expel them, or rule over them in a formal, explicit arrangement of apartheid. That may not constitute much of a tangible difference on the ground, but it marks a legal sea change.

Occupation, however ugly, is not in breach of international law, though actions related to it, such as settlement-building, may be. This allowed many liberal Jews, such as Beinart, a small comfort blanket that they have clung to tightly for decades.

When challenged about Israel's behaviour, they could always claim that the occupation would one day end, that peace talks were around the corner, that partition was possible if only Palestinians were willing to compromise a little more.

But with his annexation plan, Netanyahu ripped that comfort blanket out of their clutches and tore it to shreds. Ethnic cleansing and apartheid are both crimes against humanity. No ifs, no buts. As Sfard [points out](#):

“Once Israel began officially striving for annexation – that is, for perpetuating its rule by force – it lost this meagre alibi.”

Apartheid state

Sfard makes a further important legal observation in a report [written](#) for the human rights group Yesh Din. If Israel chooses to institute an apartheid regime in parts of the occupied West Bank – either formally or through creeping legal annexation, as it is doing now – that regime does not end at the West Bank’s borders. It would mean that “the Israeli regime in its entirety is an apartheid regime. That Israel is an Apartheid state.”

Of course, one would have to be blind not to have understood that this was where political Zionism was always heading – even more so after the 1967 war, when Israel’s actions disclosed that it had no intention of returning the Palestinian territories it had seized.

But the liberal Zionist condition was precisely one of willful blindness. It shut its eyes tight and saw no evil, even as Israel debased Palestinian life there for more than half a century. Looking back, Beinart recognises his own self-inflicted credulousness. “In practice, Israel annexed the West Bank long ago,” he [writes](#) in the New York Times.

In his two articles, Beinart denies liberal Jews the one path still available to them to rationalise Palestinian oppression. He argues that those determined to support a Jewish state, whatever it does, are projecting their own unresolved, post-Holocaust fears onto Palestinians.

In the Zionist imagination, according to Beinart, Palestinians have been [reinvented](#) as heirs to the Nazis. As a result, most Jews have been manipulated into framing Israel’s settler-colonialism in zero-sum terms – as a life-or-death battle. In that way, they have been able to excuse Israel’s perpetual abuse of Palestinians.

Or as Beinart [puts it](#):

“Through a historical sleight of hand that turns Palestinians into Nazis, fear of annihilation has come to define what it means to be an authentic Jew.” He adds that “Jewish trauma”, not Palestinian behaviour, has ended in “the depiction of Palestinians as compulsive Jew-haters”.

Forced into a choice

Annexation has forced Beinart to confront that trauma and move beyond it. Perhaps not surprisingly, most of Israel’s supporters have been reluctant to follow suit or discard their comforting illusions. Some are throwing tantrums, others sulking in the corner.

The Zionist right and mainstream have described Beinart as a traitor, a self-hating Jew, and a collaborator with Palestinian terrorism. David Weinberg of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security called Beinart “a [skill for Israel’s enemies](#)” who “secretes poison”.

Dan Shapiro, a former US ambassador to Israel, described Beinart’s advocacy of equality as a “[disaster in the making](#)”, while Dani Dayan, Israel’s consul general in New York, accused Beinart of wanting Israel to “[drop dead](#)”.

The liberal Zionist establishment has been no less discomfited. Aaron David Miller, a former US Middle East envoy, [warned](#) that Beinart’s prescription was “an illusion tethered to a fantasy wrapped in an impossibility”.

And Beinart's friend, Jeremy Ben Ami, head of the two-state lobby group J Street, snatched back the ragged remains of the comfort blanket, arguing that peace talks would be revived eventually. In a standard Zionist deflection, Ben Ami added that Israel was no different from the US in being "[far from perfect](#)".

But to understand how quickly liberal Zionist reasoning may crumble, it is worth focusing on a [critique](#) of Beinart's articles by the Israeli newspaper Haaretz's in-house liberal Zionist, Anshel Pfeffer.

Collapse of support

Pfeffer makes two highly unconvincing arguments to evade Beinart's logic. Firstly, he claims that a one-state solution – of any variety – is impossible because there is no support for it among Palestinians and Israelis. It is, he argues, a conceit Beinart has absorbed from Jews and Palestinians in the US.

Let's overlook Pfeffer's obvious mistake in ignoring the fact that a single state already exists – a Greater Israel in which Palestinians have been living for decades under a highly belligerent system of apartheid, laced with creeping ethnic cleansing. Still, his claims about where Israeli and Palestinian public opinion currently lies are entirely misleading, as is his assumption about how Beinart's attack on liberal Zionism may impact regional possibilities.

The views of Palestinians in the occupied territories (Pfeffer, of course, ignores the views of refugees) have been undergoing radical and rapid change. Support for the two-state solution has collapsed. This is far from surprising, given the current political context.

Among Palestinians, there are signs of exasperation and a mirroring of Israeli Jewish intransigence. In [one recent poll](#), a majority of Palestinian respondents demanded a return of all of historic Palestine. What can be inferred from this result is probably not much more than the human tendency to put on a brave show when faced with a highly acquisitive bully.

In fact, increasingly Palestinians understand that, if they want to end the occupation and apartheid, they will need to overthrow their compromised leaders in the Palestinian Authority (PA), effectively Israel's local security contractor. It is an uprising against the PA, not polls, that will seal the fate of the two-state solution. What may inspire Palestinians to take on the risk of a major confrontation with their leaders?

A part will be played, however small, by Palestinians' understanding of how a shift from a struggle for statehood to a struggle for equal rights in one state will be received abroad. Liberal Jewish opinion in the US will be critical in changing such perceptions – and Beinart has just placed himself at the heart of that debate.

Journey to 'self-immolation'

Meanwhile, a majority of Israeli Jews support either Greater Israel or an "end-of-the-rainbow" two-state solution, one in which Palestinians are denied any meaningful sovereignty. They do so for good reason, because either option perpetuates the status quo of a single state in which they prosper at a heavy cost to Palestinians. The bogus two-state solution privileges them, just as bantustans once did white South Africans.

The view of Israeli Jews will change, just as white South Africans' did, when they suffer a harsher international environment and the resulting cost-benefit calculus has to be adjusted.

In that sense, the issue isn't what Israeli Jews think now, when they are endlessly indulged, but what Israel's sponsors – chiefly the US – eventually demand. That is why Beinart's influence on the thinking of liberal American Jews cannot be discounted. Long term, what they insist on may prove critically important.

That was why Beinart's harshest critics, in attacking his two essays, also warned of the current direction of travel.

Jonathan Tobin, editor of the Jewish News Syndicate, [argued](#) that Beinart's views were "indicative of the crisis of faith within much of American Jewry". Weinberg described the two essays as "[frightening](#)" because they charted liberal Jews' "intellectual journey towards anti-Zionism and self-immolation".

Both understand that, if liberal Jews abandon Zionism, one leg of the Israeli stool will be gone.

Mocked as utopianism

The other problem Pfeffer inadvertently highlights with liberal Zionism is contained in his mocking dismissal of Beinart's claim that the justification for a "Jewish home" needs to be rooted in morality.

Pfeffer laughs this off as utopianism, arguing instead that Israel's existence has always depended on what he vaguely terms "pragmatism". What he means, once the euphemism is stripped out, is that Israel has always pursued a policy of "might is right".

But Pfeffer's suggestion that Israel does not also need to shape a moral narrative about its actions – even if that narrative bears no relation to reality – is patently implausible.

Israel has not relied solely on its own might. It has needed the patronage of western states to help it diplomatically, financially and militarily. And their enthusiastic support has depended on domestic perceptions of Israel as a moral agent.

Israel understands this only too well. It has presented itself as a "light unto the nations", a state that "redeemed" a barren land, and one that has the "most moral army in the world". Those are all moral claims on western support.

Beinart has demonstrated that the moral discourse for Israel is a lost cause. And for that reason, Israel's chief allies now are states led by covert, and sometimes overt, antisemites and [proud authoritarians](#).

Beinart is doubtless ahead of most liberal Jews in the US in rejecting Israel as a Jewish state. But it would be foolish indeed to imagine that there are not many others already contemplating following in his footsteps.

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