

The 'One Democratic State Campaign' Program for a Multicultural Democratic State in Palestine/Israel

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As the Leonard Cohen song goes, "everybody knows" the two-state solution is dead and gone. Zionism's 120-year quest to Judaize Palestine – to transform Palestine into the Land of Israel – has been completed. Every Israeli government since 1967 has refused to seriously entertain the notion of a genuinely independent and viable Palestinian state alongside the state of Israel. Any possibility of a viable Palestinian state in the OPT has long been buried under the massive "facts on the grounds." Israel's [Matrix of Control](#) has rendered its control over the entire country permanent.

The two-state solution nonetheless continues to be the solution-of-choice of governments. It provides a perfect vehicle for endless conflict management. Negotiations over negotiations or merely holding out slim prospects of negotiations lead nowhere but can be dragged on indefinitely, which is the point. Indeed, it is a trap in which the Palestinian Authority is caught, since disavowing the two-state solution casts it as the intransigent party.

Needed: A New Political End-Game

As important as protests, activism, BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) and other campaigns and actions may be, there is no substitute for a political settlement that will finally end the oppression and violence. One cannot be in a political struggle without an end-game, and in our case it must address two key processes: achieve restorative justice through dismantling the structures and ideologies of domination on the one hand, while replacing them with structures of social, cultural, political, economic equality, accompanied by a process of reconciliation. For that dual political process to succeed – the first most urgent for Palestinians, the second most important to sell to, or impose upon, Jewish Israelis – we need a plan, a vision of the future, and an effective strategy for getting there. This is the challenge before us, and it is urgent and crucial. If we, the stakeholders, Palestinians and Jewish Israelis together, do not offer our own peoples a mutually acceptable way out, and if we do not offer you, individuals and organizations abroad dedicated to the cause of justice in Palestine/Israel, a political program for which to advocate, we will lose. Justice does not prevail by magic. Unless it is empowered politically, it remains a vague and far-off aspiration. Worse – and this seems to be happening – activists and supporters will simply drift off to other urgent causes if there is no movement or prospect of success. Mobilization over time requires movement, direction and strategy, and only a political end-game provides that.

The time is far overdue to begin formulating a genuinely just and workable political settlement, then follow it up with an effective strategy of advocacy within Israel/Palestine

and abroad. Over the past year I have been engaged with a number of Israeli Jews and Palestinians over the formulation of a one-state program. We call ourselves the One Democratic State Campaign, (ODSC), and among its members are Awad Abdelfattah, a founder of the Balad Party and its long-time Secretary General; Ilan Pappé, the well-known Israeli historian; Diana Buttu, the well-known analyst and Palestinian activist; Daphan Baram, a lawyer, comedienne and the Director of ICAHD UK; As'ad Ghanem, a professor of Political Science at Haifa University; Siwar Aslih, a Ph.D. student in Social Psychology; Nadia Naser-Najjab, a doctoral student; Shir Hever, a political economist; Muhammad Younis, a high-tech engineer; Yoav Bar, an Israeli activist; Mohamed Kabha, a student; Sami Ma'ari, a professor of economics; and others, including myself. We have identified, I believe, the key elements to a just peace and have formulated an approach that bridges them in ways that the "sides" can agree on, or at least live with.

The Vision: A Multi-Cultural Democracy

The ODSC promotes a one-state concept that is both democratic and just but that also acknowledges the multicultural character and the collective rights of the peoples living in the country, Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews. Within a constitutional democracy in which all citizens enjoy a common citizenship, one common parliament and thoroughly equal civil rights, constitutional protection would also be granted to national, ethnic or religious collectivities desiring to retain their various identities and cultural lives if they so choose. Such an approach, acceptable to most Palestinians, addresses a key concern of Jewish Israelis: protection of their collective rights in a future country in which they will be the minority. Parliament, under the Constitution, will have no power to pass laws discriminating against any community.

Return of the Refugees

Key to any solution is the return of the Palestinian refugees and their descendants, or compensation and resettlement for those who choose not to return. But return is only part of the story. Where would they return to? Their homes and communities were demolished years ago. Well, according to the [Palestinian geographer Salman Abu-Sitta](#), 85 percent of the lands taken from the Palestinians in 1948 are still available for resettlement. Although more than 530 villages, towns and urban areas were systematically demolished following the 1948 Nakba, their agricultural lands still exist, incorporated now into Israeli kibbutzim and other rural ventures. Other lands lie under public parks and forests. So refugees could actually return, if not to their former homes, at least to the parts of the country where they originated.

This ties into yet another issue: how do we prevent the refugee population, traumatized, impoverished, severely under-educated and unskilled, from becoming an underclass in their own country? A project run partly by the Israeli-Palestinian organization Zochrot has young Palestinian planners and architects designing modern communities for the refugees in the areas they left – new communities with economic infrastructure and integrated with other segments of the society. That, together with lands redistribution, financial compensation, and equal access to education, training and the economy, bolstered by affirmative action, would enable the refugees, like other Palestinians, to achieve economic parity with Israelis within a fairly short time. We must keep in mind the resources Palestinians enjoy: the high numbers of Palestinians in Israel, the OPT and abroad that have completed higher education, together with the likely investment of their highly-educated and affluent Diaspora. Even in this most difficult of issues, practical, just and workable solutions exist.

The Question of Bi-Nationalism

As I mentioned earlier, our initiative proposes a constitutional democracy in which all citizens enjoy a common citizenship and equal rights. Having said that, we cannot ignore the fundamental reality that two national groups – Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews – inhabit the country. Nor can we ignore the fact that the majority will be Palestinians. The prospect that Jews will live as a minority community contradicts perhaps *the* fundamental principle of Zionism: that Jews as a national group control their own destiny.

Now the very fact that we must engage in a search for an alternative to the two-state solution arises from the incompatibility of this principle with Israeli policy of settling and annexing Palestinian territory and permanently ruling over a Palestinian (majority) population, even if we call our rule “autonomy.” The minute Israeli decision-makers decided to link the demand for a “Jewish state” with the policy of incorporating a Palestinian population and territory larger than its own, it created an impossible and unacceptable reality: Jewish apartheid. Jewish Israelis would certainly prefer a non-democratic Jewish state over a non-Jewish democratic state. Our program must wrestle with this dilemma. Providing constitutional recognition and protection of the collective rights of Jewish Israelis, enabling them to maintain their community within the framework of a democratic state, addresses their concerns about their security as a minority while dismantling structures of privilege and domination.

A bi-national state would be easier to sell to Jewish Israelis than a unitary one – though barely – as the various schemes of confederation or “one country/two peoples” demonstrate. But here we hit up against Palestinian resistance. While the vast majority of Palestinians recognize the permanent presence of Jewish Israelis, to be forced to acknowledge them as a national group places Palestinians in a position of having to legitimize settler colonialism in its Zionist form, which is a bridge too far. Offering to protect the “collective rights” of groups to maintain any type of community they wish within the framework of a multi-cultural democracy (which may include communities of ethnic Russians, African asylum-seekers, foreign workers who remain, anti-Zionist ultra-orthodox Jews and others) gives Jewish Israelis the collective security they seek as a minority while facilitating the forging of a common civil society.

The Challenge: Forging a Common New Civil Society

Having ensured the integrity of collective identities and associations, the thrust and primary energy of our vision of a single state is directed towards building a shared civil society. Indeed, it is the breaking of the “bi-“national model that allows people to move out of rigidly bounded ethno-national blocs into a more integrated, fluid and shared form of civil society. As the years pass and both citizens and communities of Palestine/Israel develop a sense of mutual trust, inter-connectivity and security, as younger generations emerge for whom life in a common civil society is normal, a common civil identity will invariably emerge and expand. Attracting primarily the younger generation and the more secular middle classes, an inclusive civil society would take root as a shared national life becomes routinized through common citizenship and political life, collective experiences arising out of daily life, civil marriage, integrated communities and schools (for those who choose them), shared languages, a common media, common holidays and symbols that arose from shared national existence, etc., etc. We aspire not merely to a new political entity but to a new society.



Source: author

Decolonization, Restoration and Reconciliation

While achieving a just political settlement is our most urgent task, establishing a just and working state and civil society requires three more difficult processes: decolonization, restoration and reconciliation. Decolonization does not end the moment one people ceases dominating the others. Indeed, that is the moment it begins. It then continues until all forms of domination – economic and cultural as well as political and legal – are rooted out. Decolonization requires a country to be completely reimagined and reinvented so as to be as egalitarian, inclusive and sustainable as possible. This means, of course, restoring to the expelled, excluded and oppressed their rights, properties (actual or through compensation), identities and social position. Only then can the third process, reconciliation, be pursued. We therefore “bracket” the still open wounds of the Nakba, the Occupation and the suffering they have caused so that we may reach an agreed-upon political settlement.

The Issue of Secularism

Virtually everyone involved in the ODSC project supports the idea of a secular state. Yet we recognize that the majority of both the Palestinian and Jewish Israeli populations are not secular: the vast majority of Palestinians can be defined as moderate to strict Muslims and Christians, while 58% of Jewish Israelis define themselves as religious, ranging from ultra-orthodox to “traditional.” “Secular,” then, can be a red-flag term making it even more difficult to “sell” an already daunting program.

Still, we believe that most people will accept a liberal democracy if we make it palatable, if we build in progressive elements but not rub their faces in them. Our program thus avoids the term “secular state,” but presents such a state *de facto* in two senses. First, it specifies that the authority to govern and pass laws emanates from the electorate, the people; what is left unsaid is that religious law (halakhah, sharia, ecclesiastical law) may continue to pertain within its religious communities – no one will ban religious marriages, for example – but will accompany, not displace, civil law where people choose to observe it. And second, there will be no official state-sponsored religion or religious authority.

Implications for the Region

Finally, the new state will exist in an extremely conflicted, autocratic and under-developed Middle East, albeit a region with great progressive potential as demonstrated by the massive (yet failed and repressed) uprisings in favor of democracy. It cannot exist in a vacuum. Sovereignty and borders, refugees, water, security, trade and economic development, tourism and the environment – these are only a few of the issues that are regional in scope. We envision a country that will join forces with all progressive forces in the Arab world struggling for democracy, social justice and egalitarian societies free from tyranny and foreign domination. Although this may sound utopian at a time when the region is in a melt-down, the resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict will eliminate a major source of polarization and militarization in the region, thus releasing positive forces of development and conflict resolution.

These are the main issues at stake, in our view, and I believe the approach we lay out here has great potential in bridging the deep differences and mistrust between our peoples. Our

overall program, prefaced by a Preamble that sets out the historical context and being strategized by our members, is as follows:

THE ODSC PROGRAM FOR ONE DEMOCRATIC STATE BETWEEN THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA AND THE JORDAN RIVER

Haifa

April, 2018

PREAMBLE

In recent years, the idea of a one democratic state as the best political solution for Palestine has re-emerged and gained support in the public domain. It is not a new idea. The Palestinian liberation movement promoted this vision in the PLO's National Charter until it entered the peace negotiations in the late 1980s. In the wake of the Oslo accord and other historical developments, the PLO shifted its support to the two-state solution as the basis for a future peace, a vision endorsed by all the Palestinian parties represented in the Israeli Knesset as well.

But the two-state solution is dead, buried under Israeli settlements and other massive "facts on the ground," the world's governments unwilling to exert the pressures needed to create a viable Palestinian state. This history clearly indicates that the only way to bring peace and reconciliation to Palestinians and Israelis is through the decolonizing historical Palestine based on granting equal rights, upon the full implementation of the Palestinian right of return and on the creation of a mechanism for rectifying past injustices. This is the urgent need of the moment.



As a result, several organizations and individuals have reintroduced the one-state idea over the past decade with models varying from bi-nationalism to a liberal, secular democracy. They are all united, however, in the belief that a substantially just political settlement can today only be achieved through the creation of a single state – a democratic state to replace the single apartheid state Israel has already imposed on the entire country.

Image on the right: The One Democratic State Campaign logo

The basic principles of liberation offered by the PLO in its 1968 charter still form an important element in the vision of those now engaged in formulating and advancing the one-state solution. There is a strong consensus among us that only decolonization and the rectification of past sins, in particular the right of Palestinian refugees to return to a democratic country, can bring equality, self-determination, reconciliation, prosperity, peace and justice to the land.

The following program of the One Democratic State Campaign (ODSC) provides a basis for consolidating a one-state solution. In it we seek to garner support from both Palestinians and Jewish Israelis for our joint struggle for this vision. This is the only way we will end the ongoing the ongoing colonization, racism and hatred that are destroying our lives, to prevent and reverse the takeover of Palestinian land and its burial under settlements. Only an inclusive democratic state, thoroughly decolonized, will provide for a future for all our children, a future of peace, justice and equality in all of historic Palestine.

THE ODSC PROGRAM

1. *A Single Constitutional Democracy.* One Democratic State shall be established between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River as one country belonging to all its citizens, who will enjoy equal rights, freedom and security. The State shall be a constitutional democracy, the authority to govern and make laws emanating from the consent of the governed, in which all of its citizens shall enjoy equal rights to vote, stand for office and contribute to the country's governance.
2. *Individual Rights.* No State law, institution or practices may discriminate among its citizens on the basis of national or social origin, color, gender, language, religion or political opinion, property, sexual orientation or other status. A single citizenship confers on all the State's residents the right to freedom of movement, the right to reside anywhere in the country, and equal rights in every domain. All mechanisms of governance, law enforcement and security shall be thoroughly integrated on the basis of individual merit, including the military and internal security and police forces. The IDF and other Israeli security and police forces will be replaced by newly constituted national forces.
3. *Collective Rights.* Within the framework of a single democratic state, the Constitution will also protect the collective rights of Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews to freedom of association – national, ethnic, religious, class or gender – within the framework of a common state and democracy. Constitutional guarantees will ensure that all languages, arts and culture can flourish and develop freely. All citizens shall have equal rights to use their own dress, languages and customs, to freely express their cultural heritage, and to maintain such cultural institutions as universities, museums, theatres, newspapers and all other forms of communication. No group or collectivity will have any privileges, nor will any group, party or collectivity have the ability to leverage any control or domination over others. Parliament will not have the authority to enact any laws that discriminate against any community under the Constitution.
4. *Right of Return of Restoration and of Reintegration into Society.* In accordance with UN Resolution 194, the State recognizes the right of Palestinian refugees – those who currently live in Palestine/Israel, all those who were expelled over the past century, their descendants and all others of the Exile/Diaspora – to return to their country and to the places from where they were expelled, to rebuild their personal life and to be fully reintegrated into the country's society, economy and polity. To the most practicable degree, the private property of the refugees shall be restored and/or compensation arranged. Restoring the rights of the Palestinians will be done while respecting the rights and protections of all citizens under the law. Normal procedures of obtaining citizenship will be extended to others choosing to immigrate to the country.
5. *Constructing a Shared Civil Society.* The State shall nurture a vital civil society in which common educational institutions, civil institutions such as marriage, and both the Arabic and Hebrew languages will be official languages. The State will not establish or accord special privilege to any religion, but shall provide for the free practice of all religions.
6. *Economy and Economic Justice.* Our vision seeks to achieve justice, and this includes social and economic justice. Economic policy must address the decades of exploitation and discrimination which have sown deep socioeconomic gaps among the people living in the land. The income distribution in Israel/Palestine is more unequal than any country in the world. A State seeking justice must develop a creative and long-term redistributive economic policy to ensure that

all citizens have equal opportunity to attain education, productive employment, economic security and a dignified standard of living.

7. *Decolonization, Restoration and Reconciliation.* The liberation of Palestinians and the creation of a genuinely equal and inclusive society entails more than just a political settlement or new governmental arrangements. It requires a process of thorough decolonization, a reimagining and reinventing of the country in a way that fundamentally alters relations of domination. This includes what Fanon and Ngugi call the “decolonization of the mind.” Only then will a process of national reconciliation be possible.
8. *The Commitment to Human Rights, Justice and Peace.* The State shall uphold international law and seek the peaceful resolution of conflicts through negotiation and collective security in accordance with the United Nations Charter. The State will sign and ratify all international treaties on human rights and its people shall reject racism and promote social, cultural and political rights as set out in relevant United Nations covenants.
9. *Our Role in the Region.* The ODS Campaign will join forces with all progressive forces in the Arab world struggling for democracy, social justice and egalitarian societies free from tyranny and foreign domination. In particular, the State shall seek democracy and freedom in a Middle East that respects its many communities, religions, traditions and ideologies, yet strives for equality, freedom of thought and innovation. Achieving a just political settlement in Palestine, followed by a thorough process of decolonization, will contribute measurably to these efforts.
10. *Our Global Responsibility.* On a global level, the ODS Campaign views itself as part of the progressive forces striving for an alternative global order that is just, egalitarian, inclusive, pluralistic and sustainable, one in which exploitation, racism, repression, wars, imperialism and colonialism give way to respect for human dignity, human rights, freedom, a just distribution of wealth, equal access to resources and a sustainable environment.

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