

THE BOSTON DECLARATION ON THE ONE STATE

The first North American conference to discuss a one-state solution in Palestine/Israel took place in Boston on 28-29 March 2009. Building on debates initiated at previous conferences, including those held in Madrid and London in 2007, the conference program broke new ground in its focus on the strategies, logistics, methods, policies and organizational means needed to implement a one-state solution.

Boston is central to contemporary American intellectual and academic life, and has a storied role in American history. The symbolic birthplace of the American struggle for democracy, it offered an ideal venue for a conference dedicated to promoting genuine democracy in Palestine/Israel.

Following detailed discussions of the limitations of the two-state solution, the proceedings offered a rich examination of the context, opportunities, advantages of—as well as the difficulties, obstacles, and possible objections to—the movement toward a one-state solution. The audience was large, diverse, and enthusiastic, devotedly following the debate and engaging in it via questions and discussion to the extent time allowed.

Research and analysis presented at the conference confirmed the reality that, since the beginning of Israel's occupation of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem in 1967, a single state – Israel – has governed all of historic Palestine. Thus, in effect, a single state already exists. However, the current arrangement is both unjust and unsustainable, affording full political rights only to Israeli Jews (and even among Jews there are considerable differences in access to power and privileges between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim) while denying them to Palestinians.

Currently, no Palestinian enjoys the full spectrum of rights afforded to Jewish Israelis. Palestinians who survived the expulsions attendant on the creation of Israel in 1948, and their descendants, are second-class citizens of Israel and, simply because they are not Jewish, they face systematic and institutionalized forms of discrimination, political marginalization and escalating racially-motivated threats to their well being. Palestinians who live in the West Bank and Gaza have suffered decades of brutal military occupation; thousands of them have been killed or injured; their homes have been summarily demolished, their lands expropriated, their sources of livelihood destroyed or confiscated, their ability to move around their own territory severely restricted, their access to health care and education curtailed, and their children slowly but inexorably stunted, both physically and emotionally. Meanwhile, the single largest component of the Palestinian people – those in enforced exile or refugee camps in the Arab World – are denied their fundamental human right of return to their homeland, again, simply because they do not happen to be Jewish.

Even were it still feasible, a two-state solution designed to preserve Israel as a Jewish majority state, would fail to adequately address the rights and interests of all Palestinians. Israel would have a permanent warrant to discriminate against its Palestinian citizens, and the rights of Palestinian refugees to return would be effectively annulled by the creation of a Palestinian “state” scattered throughout the West Bank and loosely connected to Gaza. Indeed, in the unlikely event that Palestinians under occupation—who comprise only a minority of the Palestinian people – could be coerced into compromising away the rights of the majority of their fellow Palestinians, the most that they could hope to receive in turn would be an archipelago of disconnected islands permanently and structurally dominated by Israel.

Only a single state offers a way to protect the human rights of Israeli Jews and all the components of the Palestinian people: those inside Israel, who would no longer suffer the stigma of being non-Jews in a state intended for Jews; those under occupation, who would be relieved of its pressures and burdens; and those in exile, who would be able at last to exercise their right of return.

It is increasingly evident that a variety of factors – chief among them Israel’s relentless colonization of the West Bank and East Jerusalem – have rendered the two-state solution little more than an ever-receding mirage that entices but never fulfills its promise. It is time to recognize that the re-partition of Palestine into two political entities is neither just nor practical, and has, for decades, been a distraction from the work that needs to be done for a just and lasting peace.

Instead of pursuing the two-state solution mirage, conference participants articulated a vision of a country founded on democratic, inclusive and egalitarian principles, and on institutions and practices that comply with international law and universal human rights. The constitution and actual practices of such a state would address the rights and needs of all its citizens. Conference speakers explored different possible configurations of a single state, including democratic secular and confederal or binational models, and agreed that further study and articulation of the relative advantages of these models is critical.

Conference participants took note of the substantial obstacles facing the implementation of the one-state vision, including the opposition of the majority of Israeli Jews, and some Palestinians as well—including PA and PLO officials who command vital resources and monopolize many of the institutions intended to serve the Palestinian people. The “international consensus” in support of the two-state solution will be difficult to challenge while the Palestinian leaderships in the occupied territories either pursue negotiations toward two states or promote resistance without strategies to achieve full Palestinian rights. Revitalizing and democratizing the PLO, and making it accountable to the needs of the entire Palestinian people, thus looms as a priority for Palestinians. A vision is needed that transcends the existing falsely “realistic” options and offers something new to both Palestinians and Israeli Jews, inviting both to accept justice and democracy as the keys to lasting peace.

And even though there are undoubtedly challenges ahead, the conference also took note of the one-state movement's substantial assets: the steadfastness of the Palestinian people in their quest for justice, peace, and equal rights; the small but growing number of Israeli Jews determined to find a way to live democratically and in mutual respect with Palestinians; the struggle for legitimacy in which universal principles of justice and democracy are beginning to turn the tide against narrow chauvinism and worn-out exclusivism; and an international solidarity movement that has responded to the call for justice by supporting boycotts, divestment, and sanctions against Israel to force its compliance with international law. Most of all, conference participants upheld the one-state vision as the only idea with the requisite moral clarity and power to transcend the current contours of the conflict, and to bring a just and therefore lasting peace to the region.

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