

The Only Path to Peace in Palestine: One Democratic State

written by Rohini Hensman | January 20, 2025



A mural near Emeryville Shellmound, the burial site of the native Ohlone people in California | Peg Hunter/Flickr (CC BY-NC 2.0)

A previous version of this article appeared in India Forum on December 29th.

Introduction

On 15 January 2025, Qatar's prime minister announced that Israel and Hamas had agreed to a three-phase Gaza ceasefire deal including an exchange of hostages and prisoners, and it would take effect on 19 January. As Israel's bombing of Gaza continued unabated and the Israeli cabinet delayed ratifying the deal, well-informed commentators predicted that Benjamin Netanyahu and his extremist allies would make sure that the ceasefire would collapse after the first phase.ⁱ Indeed, 'Netanyahu stressed that the ceasefire was "temporary" and Israel reserved the right to resume strikes in Gaza'.ⁱⁱ Despite such uncertainties, however, the ceasefire deal could provide an opportunity to move towards a just and peaceful future.

On 25 October 2024, Forensic Architecture released an interactive cartographic platform entitled 'A Cartography of Genocide' along with an 827-page text report entitled 'A spatial analysis of the Israeli military's conduct in Gaza since October 2023,' providing conclusive forensic evidence of genocide in Gaza.ⁱⁱⁱ On 5 December 2024, Amnesty International released a report which concluded that the Israeli state was committing genocide in Gaza in the strict legal sense of the term.^{iv} On 19 December 2024, Human Rights Watch released a report on the Israeli state's intentional deprivation of access to water, a necessity of life, from the population of Gaza, and concluded that this amounts to an act of genocide.^v These reports confirm analyses by dozens of Holocaust and genocide scholars, the South African government's testimony before the International Court of Justice, and the court's own rulings.

In fact, what we have been seeing in Gaza is the inevitable consequence of the model of European colonialism chosen by the original Zionists: not just occupying a colony and dominating it, not even the apartheid form of settler-colonialism that needed the indigenous people's labor, but the model of settler-colonialism that wanted the land without the people, as in the Americas and Australia. Their plan to create an ethno-religious Jewish state in a land where only 8 percent of the population was Jewish in 1914 required the remaining 92 percent of Palestinians to lose their homeland.^{vi}

Raphael Lemkin, who lost 49 members of his family in the Nazi Holocaust and who coined the term

'genocide,' had studied the phenomenon historically, and found that settler-colonialism which engaged in what was then called forced displacement and is now called ethnic cleansing inevitably entailed genocide . Because how do you clear the land of the people living in it? By massacres and the threat of massacres, by taking away people's homes and livelihoods and herding them into ghettos, by subjecting them to conditions that make life impossible, and finally by killing those who remain: exactly what has been happening in Palestine since 1948.^{vii}

The 'two-state solution'

Britain handed over the mess it had created by promising a Jewish national home in Palestine, which resulted in 'an organized campaign of lawlessness, terror and sabotage' by Zionist terrorist groups since the beginning of 1945, to the UN General Assembly in 1947. The UNGA accepted the Jewish Agency's request to be heard, despite the fact that non-governmental organizations had not previously been allowed to present their positions. The Palestinian delegation withdrew from the proceedings in protest against being relegated to a position inferior to that of the Jewish Agency; their position was 'The destiny of Palestine cannot be decided by outsiders. It is against the Charter. The destiny of Palestine shall be decided by its own people...' The Palestinian viewpoint was thereafter represented by the Arab delegations, which deplored the deletion of references to a Palestinian state in the terms of reference of the Special Committee set up to look into the issue, while David Ben-Gurion stated the Zionist view that the whole of Palestine belonged to the Zionists.^{viii}

The Special Committee was unable to agree on recommendations, with the majority of it in favor of partition (the two-state solution), a minority in favor of an independent federal state of Palestine. When the two plans were placed before the UNGA in August 1947, there was strong opposition to partition, and not only from Arab delegates. Rabbi Judah Leon Magnes, a leader of Reform Judaism and President of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, wrote prophetically that 'partition would not stop the terrorist activities of Jewish groups, and that having secured partition through terror, they would attempt to secure the rest of the country for the Jews in the same way'. The Pakistan delegate said, 'In effect, the proposal before the United Nations General Assembly says that we shall decide - not the people of Palestine, with no provision for the self-determination, no provision for the consent of the governed...' Thirteen delegations spoke against partition and only eleven in favour. Yet in the final vote on 29 November 1947, there were 33 votes in favour including the USSR and other Soviet Socialist Republics, 13 against, and 10 abstentions.^{ix}

How was this result obtained? 'Chaim Weizmann, the senior Zionist figure in London and Washington, asked Truman to intervene. "I am aware of how much abstaining delegations would be swayed by your counsel and the influence of your government," he told the president. "I refer to China, Honduras, Colombia, Mexico, Liberia, Ethiopia, Greece. I beg and pray for your decisive intervention at this decisive hour." The Philippines, Cuba, Haiti, and even France were also on the list of countries that needed a push. "We went for it", Clark Clifford, Truman's special counsel, said later. "It was because the White House was for it that it went through. I kept the ramrod up the State Department's butt." Herschel Johnson, the deputy head of the US mission at the UN, cried in frustration while speaking to Loy Henderson, a senior diplomat, head of the State Department's Office of Near Eastern Affairs and strong opponent of the establishment of a Zionist settler state in Palestine. "Loy, forgive me for breaking down like this," Johnson said, "but Dave Niles called us here a couple of days ago and said that the president had instructed him to tell us that, by God, he wanted us to get busy and get all the votes that we possibly could, that there would be hell if the voting went the other way.'"^x

This is how the Philippine delegate ended up voting for partition after having earlier strongly rejected the partition proposal, saying, 'The Philippine Government has come to the conclusion that it cannot give its support to any proposal for the political disunion and the territorial dismemberment of Palestine. We have assessed the legal arguments and found that they are not the decisive factors in shaping a just and practical solution. Whatever the weight we might choose to assign to the arguments of the one side or the other, it is clear to the Philippine Government that the rights conferred by mandatory power, even if subsequently confirmed by an international agreement, do not vitiate the primordial right of a people to determine the political future and to preserve the territorial integrity of its native land.' The Lebanese government protested vehemently against the tactics being used to arm-twist delegates into voting against their conscience, and pressed its delegate to resist them: 'I can also imagine how you have resisted all these attempts in order to preserve what we hold dearest and most sacred in the United Nations, to keep intact the principles of the Charter, and to safeguard democracy and the democratic methods of our Organization. My friends, think of these democratic methods, of the freedom in voting which is sacred to each of our delegations. If we were to abandon this for the tyrannical system of tackling each delegation in hotel rooms, in bed, in corridors and ante-rooms, to threaten them with economic sanctions or to bribe them with promises in order to compel them to vote one way or another, think of what our Organization would become in the future. Should we be a democratic organization? Should we be an organization worthy of respect in the eyes of the world? At this supreme juncture, I beg you to think for a moment of the far-reaching consequences which might result from such manoeuvres, especially if we yielded to them ...'^{xii}

Indeed, far from stemming the violence, the UNGA resolution to partition Palestine, achieved by corruption and sordid self-interest, merely provided a fig-leaf for escalating violence that has led inexorably to genocide. Despite widespread references to the so-called 'two-state solution' even today, it was evident from the beginning, as David Ben-Gurion made clear at the UN partition discussion referred to above, that the Zionists had no intention of allowing a Palestinian state to be established on even a small fraction of Palestinian territory. The goal of establishing the Israeli state over the entirety of Palestine has been expressed more openly in recent years, with Benjamin Netanyahu displaying a map of the region in the UN in September 2023 with no vestige of Palestine.^{xiii} The 'two-state solution' was finally laid to rest by Israel's Knesset voting overwhelmingly (68:9) on 18 July 2024 that Palestinian statehood would pose 'an existential danger to the State of Israel,' making it clear that so long as the Israeli state exists, there will be no Palestinian state.^{xiii} Indeed, according to Finance Minister Belazel Smotrich, the Israeli state should encompass not just Palestine but also extend into Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Iraq and Saudi Arabia.^{xiv}

Given that around 95 percent of the land controlled by Israel has been acquired through the forcible expulsion of the original Palestinian population, it is not surprising that it rejects both international law and UN principles, which would rule out such a course of action. The participation and complicity of Western leaders in such violations enabled the descent of ethnic cleansing into genocide. For example, while the Israeli bombardment of Gaza after the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023 was targeting civilians and slaughtering thousands of children, these leaders justified it by citing 'Israel's right to defend itself,' trying to provide credibility to the flagrant lie that Hamas was the only target. In any case, 'To suggest that the thief has any kind of "right" to "defend" stolen property is ludicrous. The right belongs to the person fighting for its return, as the Palestinians have been doing every day since 1948. Beyond the 5-6 percent the Zionist land purchasing agencies actually bought before 1948, the Israelis are living on and in stolen property. They will defend it but they have no "right" to defend what by any legal, moral, historical or cultural measure belongs to someone else.'^{xv}

The only just and moral solution: one democratic state

So long as the Israeli state exists, its attempts to eliminate Palestine will continue, and so will its bombing, invasion and occupation of neighboring states like Lebanon and Syria. The war with Hamas will also continue, because resistance to genocidal settler-colonialism is inevitable, and if non-violent resistance is crushed, there will be violent resistance. Israel has murdered peaceful demonstrators in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza,^{xvi} and Zionists in powerful positions in other countries have tried to shut down the non-violent BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) movement.^{xvii} They have arrested and beaten peaceful pro-Palestine demonstrators including Jews, and punished people expressing support for Palestine by taking away their jobs or university places. In their zeal to crush non-violent support for Palestine, Zionists have teamed up with neo-Nazis like the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, Alternative for Germany), putting Jews in danger of their antisemitic violence.^{xviii}

Israel has never been a democracy; no ethno-religious or ethnic state – whether Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist or other – can be a democracy, because those who do not belong to the dominant group will not have equal rights. At best it will be an apartheid state, at worst a genocidal one. In the past, however, Jewish citizens of Israel enjoyed a fair range of democratic rights, but these have been drastically eroded as Israel descended from ethnic cleansing to genocide. Ofer Cassif, the only Jewish Member of the Knesset from the left-wing Hadash Party, says, ‘alongside genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, atrocities, occupation, and persecution of Palestinians in their territories, there’s also fascism growing stronger in Israel by legislation and by the persecution of citizens, arresting people, beating people, etc. Israel is on the verge of a full-fledged fascist regime.’^{xix} The Israeli state has become a menace even to its own Jewish citizens.

The solution proposed by the **One Democratic State Initiative (ODSI)** is a democratic, inclusive Palestinian state in the whole of Palestine, ‘from the river to the sea,’ in which all citizens would have equal rights regardless of ethnic or religious identity.^{xx} ‘By identifying Zionism’s politicization of identity and Israel’s nature as a state exclusive to Jews as the root issue of the suffering and injustice in Palestine, the “One Democratic State” solution clearly defines liberation as the dismantling of the apartheid, settler-colonial state and the establishment of one democratic state in its stead.’ It thus identifies its twin goals as decolonization and democratization.

Why should it be called a ‘Palestinian’ state? ‘For the same reason why Theodor Herzl, Arthur Balfour, the World Zionist Organization, the British Mandate and the League of Nations called it Palestine, why the “Jewish Agency for Israel” was originally called the “Jewish Agency for Palestine”, why they considered naming the Jewish state “Palestine” (and only dropped it in anticipation of partition), and why Shimon Perez and Golda Meir held Palestinian citizenship: Because “Palestine” has been the land’s name for over 2500 years. Unlike the Hebrew word “Israel”, which is exclusive to Judaism and therefore exclusive of non-Jews, “Palestine” refers, not to an Arabic or Islamic identity, but to the geographical area where a democratic state can treat all its citizens equally, regardless of how they choose to identify.’

Wouldn’t this mean the ethnic cleansing or genocide of Israeli Jews? Not at all. ‘Although there is no universal consensus on the conditions that define one’s belonging to a society, the principles of *jus soli* (“right of soil”, the right of an individual born in a territory to be a citizen of its state) and *jus sanguinis* (“right of blood”, the right of an individual to hold their parents’ citizenship) are commonly applied... In accordance with the above, ...Palestinian citizenship will be extended to all native Palestinians, including all who were expelled over the past century and their descendants.’ The new state would also extend ‘Palestinian citizenship to all Jews who have broken free from Zionism and who wish to remain in it as Palestinians.’ In other words, Israeli Jews who wish to remain in Palestine as Palestinian citizens would have the right to be citizens of the new democratic state on the basis of equal rights.

Doesn't the state of Israel have the right to exist? 'The Zionist project has disregarded the basic democratic rights of the (Jewish and non-Jewish) population of Palestine by effecting, with essential British colonial help, the mass immigration of non-Palestinians to Palestine prior to 1948 and by establishing a "state exclusive to Jews" in Palestine in 1948 with no democratic mandate to do so. The continued existence of a state exclusive to Jews rather than a democratic state of all its citizens means that the trampling of these democratic human rights is ongoing and is therefore not "right". A transition to a democratic state of all its citizens would right this century-old wrong and would be a historic step in achieving just and lasting peace in Palestine and the Middle East.' Not even members of an oppressed community have a 'right' to oppress others, and the existence of the state of Israel is premised on its supposed 'right' to oppress Palestinians.

In addition, this would be:

A democratic state, a state for all its citizens with no discrimination on the basis of religion, ethnicity, culture, language, sex or gender, thus preserving the distinctiveness of the Palestinian heritage in its cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity; not a duplicate of capitalist colonial models, but a state, i.e. a functional administrative tool, whose society actively takes part in politics and through which its society expresses its political will and chooses how to administer its affairs.

A secular state, that separates religion from politics, claims no religious legitimacy, safeguards the freedom of belief, the right to profess and practice religion, and all fundamental rights, and refuses to grant or deny rights on the basis of one's religious, ideological or cultural background, in full rupture with Zionism and its sectarian nature.

A socially just state, whose institutions are built on the principle of economic and social equality between segments of society and that builds a pluralistic, free and progressive society as an aspect of liberation. A state that frees popular classes from poverty, unemployment and marginalization and guarantees free quality education, social security and workers' rights.

Is the establishment of a democratic state in place of Israel antisemitic? 'Claiming that a democratic solution is antisemitic implies that Judaism is antidemocratic, and *that* is antisemitic... Zionism has used Judaism to justify its settler colonial project... and has effectively conflated Judaism and Jewishness with colonialism in the eyes of Jews and non-Jews alike. It is noteworthy that although Zionism is the only ideology to have succeeded at establishing a state for one identity over others in Palestine, the ODS solution does not single it out as the sole ideology to aim at doing so, and is also opposed to the creation of a state exclusive to Arabs, Muslims, or any other identity.' This is an important clarification: ODS is as much opposed to an Arab or Muslim state as it is to a Jewish state.

Indeed, none of what has been suggested above is antisemitic according to the definition proposed by hundreds of Jewish scholars in the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism, provided that 'the same norms of debate that apply to other states and to other conflicts over national self-determination apply in the case of Israel and Palestine.'^{xxi} Thus, for example, one would have to apply the same norms of debate that apply to Ukraine's struggle against Russia for self-determination to Palestine's struggle against Israel for self-determination.

ODSI suggests that supporters of Palestine carry on doing what they are already doing – taking part in demonstrations, educating themselves and others about what has been happening in Palestine for over a century, participating in the BDS movement, and so on – but, in addition, emphasise that One

Democratic State is the goal, and coordinate their efforts with others who share that goal.^{xxii} Among them is the Palestinian National Initiative (Al-Mubadara) led by Mustafa Barghouti, which is trying to unify Palestinians around the goal of decolonization and the establishment of a democratic Palestinian state.^{xxiii}

Moving towards justice and peace

Anti-Zionist Jews who live in Israel need to retain Israeli citizenship in order to continue their struggle, but those who live in other countries have found another way: renouncing their Israeli citizenship. In the words of Nadav Gazit, 'Modern Zionism, which emerged in the 1800s, is an unethical, immoral, and evil settler-colonial project, held together by lies, racism, propaganda, and the support of world superpowers with their own interests in the resource-rich region. It cannot provide a "safe haven" for Jews, and Zionism is antithetical to Jewish values... Every moral and ethical part of my bones, flesh, and soul leaves me with only one viable option: to unequivocally renounce my Israeli citizenship.' He also said he was moved to tears after posting his letter of renunciation on social media, when he 'received heartfelt messages from Palestinians inviting me to their homes and families,'^{xxiv} reminding us that among the admirable qualities displayed by Palestinians in this dark time is their incredible generosity.

Another renouncer, Avi Steinberg, explains, 'Citizenship, of the kind I hold, has been a material piece of a long-standing genocidal process. The Israeli state, from its inception, has relied on the normalization of ethnically determined supremacist laws to bolster a military regime whose clear colonial goal is the elimination of Palestine.' He criticizes his parents, who 'managed to become both American liberals who opposed the U.S. invasion of Vietnam, while also acting as armed settlers of another people's land,' and for being proponents of 'a "peace" in which the original sin of the state, the ongoing process of ethnic cleansing, would remain firmly in place'. He believes that Jewish liberation is inseparable from broad social movements, and says that 'As a traditional Jew, I believe the Torah is radical in its contention that Jewish people, or any people, have no *right* at all to any land, but rather are bound by rigorous ethical responsibilities... The only entity with sovereign rights, according to the Torah, is the God of justice, the God who despises the usurper and the occupier. Zionism has nothing to do with Judaism or Jewish history... Zionist colonization cannot be reformed or liberalized: Its existential identity, as expressed in its citizenship laws and repeated openly by those citizens, amounts to a commitment to genocide.' Hence, decolonization is 'both the path and the destination.'^{xxv}

Preventing and punishing Israel's genocide in Palestine is a priority right now; the sadistic cruelty of what the Israeli state has been doing constitutes an assault not only on the human rights of Palestinians, but also on the whole edifice of international law, and on humanity itself. 153 countries have ratified the Genocide Convention but it is considered to be binding even on those countries which have not done so, and political leaders in all of them are under an obligation to *prevent* Israel from resuming the genocide by imposing full sanctions on it, and *punish* all those involved in it, from the Israeli political and military leadership down to every soldier. Failing this, they would be guilty of complicity with genocide, which is also a crime under the Genocide Convention.^{xxvi} Countries which have been colluding with Israel's genocide owe reparations to the Palestinians, including compensation to the families of those who have been killed, payment for medical treatment and rehabilitation to those who have been injured, trauma counselling for all survivors, especially children, and rebuilding of all infrastructure and buildings that have been destroyed or damaged, along with re-equipment of hospitals, schools, universities, etc.

It is worth pointing out that although the United States and most Western countries have been most obviously supportive of Israel in its genocidal onslaught on Palestine, the BRICS+ countries, especially China, Russia, India and the UEA, have also been collaborating with it. Brazil and even

South Africa, which has taken the commendable step of bringing the genocide case against Israel to the ICJ, have continued to supply oil and coal to Israel.^{xxvii} Therefore we, the peoples of all these countries, who have been watching in anguish the carnage which Holocaust survivor Gabor Maté compared to Auschwitz,^{xxviii} are under an obligation to put maximum pressure on our political leaders to abide by the Genocide Convention, while campaigning for boycott of and divestment from not just Western companies but all companies which have been colluding with the genocide, including China's Hikvision and India's Adani. Crucial to a just peace is an alternative vision of the ultimate goal in Palestine: From the river to the sea, freedom and democracy.

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