



A wall separating Palestine from Israel in Bethlehem is covered with peace-themed graffiti. SHUTTERSTOCK



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OPINION

that the two-state solution — a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza — was no longer viable. There were simply too many settlers, settlements, and an all-pervasive Israeli military presence.

The following year, I returned as part of a delegation of foreign academics for a study tour of the country. Part of the itinerary included a memorable helicopter ride over the Old City of Al-Quds (Jerusalem) and central Israel. The aim, the pilot explained, was to demonstrate the precariously small size of the country and thus elicit our sympathy. When looking down on the windy route of the relatively new separation wall, I couldn't miss how it intruded into Palestinian territory and snaked around the Palestinian town of Qalqilya, effectively cutting off its inhabitants from their agricultural lands and the rest of the West Bank. Matters have escalated since then. According to the UN, between 2012 and 2022, the number of Israeli settlers living in the 279 illegal settlements increased from 520,000 to 700,000 people. Of these settlers, 229,000 reside in 14 settlements in occupied East Jerusalem.

As a map of the West Bank reveals, the settlements are spaced to shatter Palestinian territory into disconnected parcels, making land swaps all but impossible — an outcome that is no accident.

Killing off the two-state solution became the political consensus among all major Israeli political parties after the Second Intifada (2000–2005). Since 2009, the Israeli public has continued to elect a leader — Benjamin Netanyahu — who had campaigned against the Oslo Accords with the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

Across his three terms as prime minister, Netanyahu has tried to prevent the realisation of a two-state solution by entrenching the West Bank occupation to the extent that some Israeli human rights organisations have joined Palestinian and international bodies in categorising the system of institutionalised inequality as “apartheid”. Most recently, he advocated for the Nation-State Law that restricts self-determination solely to Jewish people, and that legalises systematic discrimination against Palestinian citizens of Israel.

In other words, Israeli policy has produced a one-state reality from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: Israeli power determines the lives of all people, whether Jewish, Muslim, or Christian, in the West Bank and Gaza in grossly unequal legal arrangements. If Hamas governs Gaza internally, Israel retains control of its borders, air-space and sea access, thereby remaining the occupying power under international law.

This reality is unstable for two reasons. First, Hamas resolved to place the Palestinian question back on the geopolitical agenda with its attack on southern Israel on October 7, which killed an estimated 1,200 Israelis and guest workers. In response, Israel has killed more than 25,000 Palestinians in Gaza and laid waste to much of the strip.

In the West Bank, the Israeli cabinet is implementing what the French government has called a “policy of terror” to drive out as many Palestinians as possible. The UN estimates that, acting in concert, the Israeli military and settler militias have killed over 300 West Bank Palestinians since October 7, arrested thousands more, burned agricultural land, destroyed property, and driven out shepherds and villagers.

Observing the looming destabilisation, Western leaders are now dredging up the two-state solution, by which they mean merely the granting of local autonomy to Palestinian enclaves, not meaningful sovereignty. In other words, this “solution” is the continuation of inequality and discrimination by other means.

In those circumstances, Palestinian resistance will continue because Palestinians say they want what Zionists want: to return to their independent homeland from which they were expelled.

If Western leaders want to address Palestinian resistance, they need to confront this historical injustice and the current Israeli “policy of terror”. Since the two-state solution is an illusion, the only option is granting political equality for everyone living in the region.

This is not a new idea. It has been conceptualised in different ways. Resisting the partition of their country, Palestinians have advocated for a democratic non-sectarian state for Muslims, Christians, and Jews since the 1930s. Also with long histories are binational confederal proposals that reconcile the existence of autonomy for Jewish and Palestinian nations in a single state with security and political equality. It is often forgotten today that Zionist thinkers toyed with similar ideas in the 1930s.

The minority report of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine also advanced such a plan in 1947. But the Committee's majority report, which was ultimately adopted, recommended partitioning the British Mandate against the wishes of the Arab population and allotted most of the land to the minority Jewish population. One year later, 700,000 Palestinians were expelled from or fled their homes during the Nakba, becoming refugees in the region. By December 1948, the UN General Assembly passed a

motion declaring that Palestinian refugees “wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours” should be able to do so. But Israel has always refused because reversing the long-sought demographic advantage is interpreted as national suicide.

To ensure Jewish security, Israel expelled and rules over Palestinians, resulting in their insecurity. To this end, Netanyahu is now declaring permanent occupation of all territory west of the Jordan River, where Israeli and Palestinian populations are roughly equal. Meanwhile, religious zealots in his coalition are urging “voluntary” emigration of Palestinians — an echo of the Nakba.

Understanding that this stance cannot guarantee security in the long-run, a growing number of Israelis are having second thoughts, especially as their cabinet prioritises destroying Gaza over negotiating the release of captives.

A new poll indicates that a small majority of Israelis support a two-state solution if Palestine is “demilitarised”. It is unclear where Palestinians stand on the subject, but they are not going to tolerate Israeli control, however “lite” or indirect.

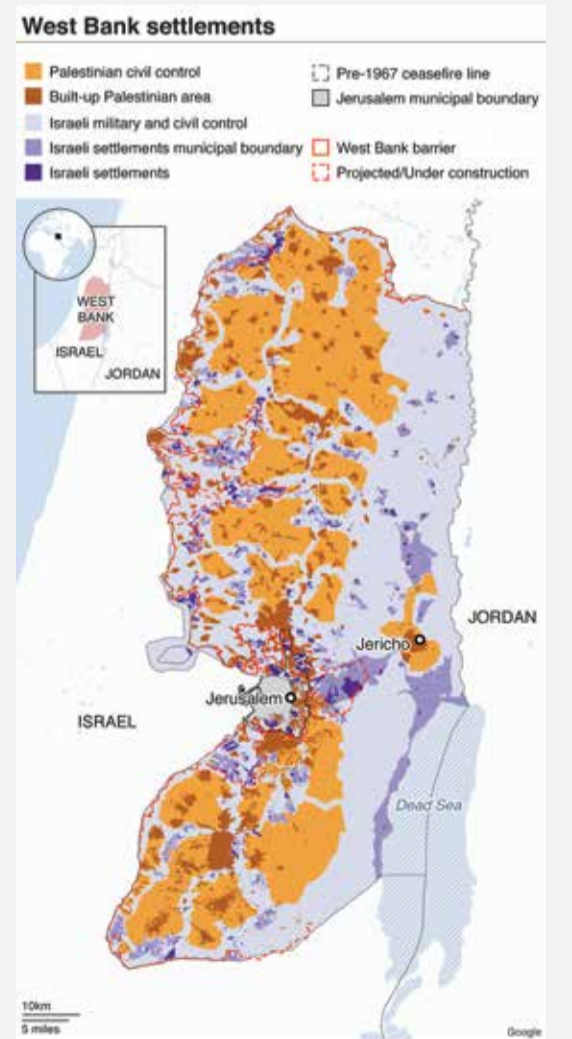
Meanwhile, Hamas sends mixed signals, either seeking the expulsion of Israelis from illegal settlements or provisionally accepting Gaza and the West Bank as the site of a Palestinian state. It is likely to oppose any arrangements in which Palestinians cannot protect themselves, meaning it will likely oppose demilitarised “solutions”.

This lack of basic trust on all sides is the outcome of Israel's violent foundation, and the catastrophic horrors that led to it. It is naive, then, to expect that confederal or binational arrangements will be met with majority support from Israelis. But as the European Union's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said this week, if the world wants to see peace achieved, “the solution has to be imposed from outside because the two parties will never be able to reach an agreement.”

Recognising Palestinian equality is the way forward. While there are those who believe this solution equates to the destruction of Israel, that is not true. But it would mean substantial change, and a different Israel to the one we know today.

Yet, it is hard to see how that solution can be achieved. The dream of self-determination, meaning separation and control, is intrinsic to Israeli nationality. And yet, forcing a fake two-state solution on Palestine will only ensure everyone's continuing insecurity. As Borrell noted, “If this tragedy doesn't end soon, the entire Middle East might end up in flames.”

The article first appeared on the Brisbane Times.



Map of the West Bank as of 2019. BT/SELEM

portant because it is the basis from which those small and everyday social changes grow, and these are the building blocks of long-term and lasting peace.

In this respect, leaders from both sides have failed. There's been a long and concentrated effort from those in power to create a picture of “the enemy”. But when you step back from the top and look at things on a day-to-day level, we see that is not true and that peace is achievable.

At the height of apartheid in South Africa, many — myself included — believed it could only end in bloodshed; there was so much hatred. And yet, Nelson Mandela was able to show the world what the right leadership at the right time could do for the long walk to peace.

From this war, there will be a generation of Israelis and Palestinians who are deep-

ly traumatised and shaped by what they have seen and experienced. And while projects and initiatives that support peace can act as a template for these people, they will only work with the right leadership.

It is sad to think that the one thing Hamas and the Israeli extreme right seem to agree on is undermining the two-state solution. A one-state constitution where Israelis, Arabs, and Palestinians are not equal would never be accepted, and it would be seen as an apartheid state.

I have seen Palestinians and Israelis rise above tribalism and become peacemakers. Now, those in charge must do the same.

Indeed, as Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers”.

The article first appeared on the Brisbane Times.

them, and with varying opinions about how they wish to be governed. Instead, the Blueprint demands that the basic, inalienable human rights of all Palestinians are acknowledged, and that the question of how the territory is organised be answered by an enfranchised electorate.

Critically, what's still missing is the international pressure to force the Israeli cabinet to start considering alternatives outside what's on the table. Just as it took both domestic resistance to apartheid rule in South Africa and international sanctions to pressure the ruling white Nationalist Party to reform itself, so too do Palestinians need the international community to step up to demand that Israel's cabinet changes.

The absence of international accountability is primarily due to successive US administrations supporting Israel militarily and shielding it from meaningful global pressure. This includes blocking UN Security Council resolutions for sanctions and cease-fire and pressing the International Criminal Court to slow-walk its ongoing investigation of abuses in Palestine. But the dramatic changes in US public opinion, increasingly supportive of Palestinians and critical of the Biden administration's persistent cover for Israeli abuses, can and should translate into a shift in the US government's historical unconditional support for Israel.

But a path out of this quagmire isn't just possible, it's essential. The decades-long period of death and destruction in Israel and Palestine is a problem that the international community helped create and one it is responsible for solving.

Millions of Palestinians and Israelis are fed up with living and dying in permanent conflict. Now, we must press the United States and Western governments to do their part to fix it.

The article first appeared on the Brisbane Times.



Late PLO chairman Yasser Arafat (C) talks with then-Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin (R) and then-Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres during a meeting at the Erez checkpoint near Gaza on January 19, 1995. REUTERS