

INTERVIEW

**INTEGRATIVE APPROACHES TO
THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT**

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What are “integrative approaches”?

Bashir Bashir: The classical two-state approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, based on territorial separation and segregation, has led to unacceptable compromises with regard to certain central Palestinian claims and rights. Integrative approaches posit that more equitable results might be achieved through egalitarian and inclusive institutional arrangements for Palestinians and Israelis, such as a federation or confederation. By moving beyond conventional notions of sovereign borders, integrative approaches open the door to new concepts of shared, overlapping, and partial sovereignty.

Why do you think there is increasing attention being paid to integrative approaches?

BB: Historically, going back to the British Mandate and also during the 1960s and 1970s, such approaches were proposed. But over time and for various reasons, they were almost entirely marginalized in favor of what became known as the two-state solution. When Palestinian thinkers first began to articulate two-state outcomes, there was little colonial Israeli settlement presence in the West Bank and Jerusalem, so issues related to resources and Jerusalem could be dealt with bilaterally.

But the expansion of the settlements and the further colonization of the West Bank and East Jerusalem amount to a return of what we might call the settler-colonial paradigm. As the realities on the ground have shifted, there are increasing indications that Palestinians and Israelis are becoming inseparable. With the peace process hostage to American dishonesty and the collapse of the Green Line as a marker of sovereign boundaries and political solutions, some activists, intellectuals, and even former officials have concluded that the question of Palestine/Israel is not about the borders of 1967, it's about the Nakba and its persisting consequences.¹ Briefly, it is about the entire land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River as a single entity.

Broadly speaking, what are the different types of integrative approaches?

BB: I describe the three broad approaches as liberal, binational, and shared-sovereignty. It's important to note that this taxonomy is purely analytical, since there is an intersection between the three strands and each strand encompasses a wide range of possibilities.

Central to the liberal approach is the notion of one person, one vote. The outcome is a state that measures belonging based on citizenship. Collective communities or national groups don't matter much because politics are orchestrated at the level of individuals. Of

course, it is very hard to convince the Palestinians and Israelis to abandon and transcend their national identities, and some might even argue that efforts to do so could be a recipe for worse than what we have now.

Perhaps more promising than this liberalism and its claim to neutrality is the binational approach, which explicitly states that there are two distinct national identities, Israeli and Palestinian, both of which are entitled to national self-determination. Regardless of your position on Zionism, Israeli Jewish nationalism in Palestine has become an established fact. Politics doesn't stop with individual rights—there need to be collective rights, which means an ethnic frame for binational politics. Binational institutions can range from those established through a system of rigid federalism to regional autonomy to power-sharing arrangements as in consociational democracies, such as the ones in Belgium or Bosnia. However, binationalism also requires decolonization, which means dismantling Jewish symbolic and structural privileges and supremacy.

The shared-sovereignty approach imagines a hybrid, multilayered institutional setting, where sovereignty is not understood as absolute and indivisible but rather as partial, shared, and interlinked. You could imagine a form of confederation of parallel state structures, in which the land is divided into two states with Palestinians exercising sovereignty over themselves and Israelis over themselves. Others have spoken of two states for one homeland, without strictly fixed internal borders. Another possibility is two states with institutions that are separate but overlapping to varying degrees.

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Is there a price to be paid for Palestinians in moving toward integrative approaches in terms of Palestinian nationalism and institutions?

BB: Absolutely. One of the most important things is not to give up the huge gains that Palestinians have achieved in the past fifty years—the tremendous political, symbolic, and diplomatic advances that comes with their recognition as a nation. That would be suicidal.

In practice, integrative approaches require Palestinians to make profound shifts from the language of conventional statehood to nation-building based on inalienable rights. Of course, Palestinian leaders, rightly, will continue to speak about statehood because the nation-state continues to be the main player of the international order. But at some point, there might be a shift of focus from pursuing statehood to consolidating nationhood. This

will likely happen if such a shift does not require that Palestinians surrender their national achievements, so that self-determination can be realized within the confines of a binational state, a confederation, or some other institutional arrangement.

It is unimaginable that Israel would embrace such an outcome. Aren't these integrative solutions even less likely to be successful than the two-state outcomes?

BB: Who says that these paradigms need to be realized in the full sense of the word? What is useful in these elaborations is that they are destinations, even if they are unlikely to be reached, based on deeper concepts of historical reconciliation. Historical injustices occurred, and the Nakba and its consequences are continuously felt by the majority of Palestinians. This requires a political process that is substantively different from the Oslo process. This new political process needs to come to terms with the dire realities and conditions of dispossession, occupation, and oppression that most Palestinians experience and endure. There are enormous consequences of deciding, in the context of traditional two-state negotiations, to defer such questions to a later stage. One reason the Oslo process failed was because—while Palestinians recognized Israel and Israel recognized the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization]—the historical injustices of the Nakba were not acknowledged from the very beginning. In South Africa, on the other hand, the framework was clear. It included the bill of rights, the freedom charter, and an accounting of the historical record of apartheid.

To what extent are advocates of one-state or integrative outcomes actually trying to create leverage, based for example on demographics trends, for a two-state outcome?

BB: Some have said we should use one-state language because this will push the Israelis or their international friends toward a two-state outcome. Using the language of one state without really believing in it surely doesn't constitute a credible threat. The Israelis already understand very clearly that the two-state solution is dying with the expansion of the settlements.

You find Palestinians who say that a state itself is their ultimate aim—but, in reality, a state is simply one possible tool through which Palestinians can realize their rights. What's been on offer in the Oslo process might nominally be called a state, but it's actually deprived of the features of a fully sovereign state. So when politicians like Benjamin Netanyahu or Avigdor Lieberman talk of a two-state solution, it is actually a smokescreen for continued Israeli hegemony and domination.

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NOTES

- 1 Editor’s note: Named after the color of its ink on a map, the Green Line refers to the 1949 Armistice Line between Israel and its Arab neighbors following the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, which had constituted a de facto boundary until the June 1967 war. The Nakba (catastrophe) refers to the uprooting of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arab residents during the 1948 war. A core Palestinian demand has been redress for these refugees, defined as those who were displaced in 1948 and their descendants, who are now estimated to number roughly 7 million persons.
- 2 Bashir Bashir, “The Strengths and Weaknesses of Integrative Solutions for the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” *Middle East Journal* 70, no. 4 (Autumn 2016): 560–78.